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THE SQUARE PEG BY W. E. NORRIS.

IN ONE VOLUME.

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THE SQUARE PEG

BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF

"MY FRIEND JIM," "THE DANCER IN YELLOW," ETC.

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LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1907.

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THE SQUARE PEG.

CHAPTER I.

GREAT NEWS.

MRS. HADLOW, seated in her Chelsea house at the breakfast-table which her two young daughters had quitted and which still awaited the always tardy appearance of her eldest son, had been making intricate calculations with the aid of a pencil and a scrap of paper, and had arrived at the depressing conclusion that when your resources amount rigidly to so much, while your expenditure, roughly estimated, amounts to so much more, an annual deficit must result. This vexed the poor plump lady and made her look a little less good-humoured than usual. Plump she remained, despite the cares of life and the fifty well-rung years which had sprinkled with silver her abundant and once golden hair; poor in a relative—or perhaps it ought to be said even in a positive—sense she had found herself ever since her husband, a successful barrister in his day, had died, leaving her to bring up and educate four children upon a small fortune invested in trust

securities. She was saying to herself that living in London is not cheap, whatever people may pretend, that the maintenance of a young man at Cambridge is horribly dear, that female apparel runs away with a lot of money when the fashions change so constantly, and that, for her part, she couldn't at all see what the end of it was going to be, at this rate.

To her, thus wrapped in gloomy meditation, there presently entered a tall and handsome young fellow whose style of attire, taken in conjunction with his closely trimmed Vandyke beard and the length to which he permitted his crisp, dark hair to grow, proclaimed him at a glance to be an artist. He said, in accents of remonstrance:

"My dear mother, why will you always insist upon waiting for me?"

"I haven't waited," Mrs. Hadlow answered. "I finished my breakfast before the girls left for their class, half an hour ago. Yours is in the fender, keeping itself as warm as it can. If the tea is undrinkable, that isn't my fault. I thought I would stay and pour it out for you because we really must have a talk about ways and means, Cyril. You hate the subject, I know, but——"

"Not this morning," interrupted the young man, with a smile which showed how white and strong and even his teeth were; "I shall quite enjoy it this morning. I've got some great news for you, mother, which you shall hear as soon as I've swallowed a few mouthfuls of food."

He had a healthy appetite, the appeasing of which upon tepid eggs and bacon his mother watched without

impatience. Taught by experience, she could form a pretty shrewd guess at the nature of Cyril's news and did not anticipate from it any important addition to their joint capital.

"Well," she said at length; "some art-editor has given you a commission, I suppose?"

"On the contrary, the last art-editor to whom I applied has sent my stuff back to me with the usual complimentary letter and the usual regret that, owing to the degradation of the public taste, his magazine can only be made to pay its way by means of reproduced photographs. The truth, I am afraid, is that the prospects of workers in black and white have never looked more black or less white than they do at the present day. I confess that this man's refusal, coming on the top of so many previous ones, discouraged me a little, and I was asking myself whether I hadn't better advertise for somebody who might be willing to adopt a gifted, but hitherto unappreciated, pauper when I opened another letter which was waiting to be read, and found, if you please, that that was exactly what somebody had done!"

"Adopted you?" asked Mrs. Hadlow incredulously.

The young man nodded. "Just that. Oh, it's a perfectly genuine proposal—perfectly serious. And from a money point of view one must admit that it's seductive. My patron is Sir Martin Hadlow, who seems to think that he ought to apologise for having made no attempt to cultivate my acquaintance earlier, but pleads that circumstances and our long residence abroad have been to blame for that. Perhaps 'circumstances' means a

pardonable disinclination on his part to seek out poor relations. We are cousins, he says."

"Yes; your father was his first cousin. I remember meeting him years ago, when he was a Cabinet Minister and a great personage. I am sure I must often have mentioned him to you as the head of the family, but it never occurred to me that he would be likely to take any notice of us. Of course you can't mean that he literally offers to adopt you."

"He makes that offer in explicit terms and at great length. The property, it appears, is not entailed; yet, as I should be the next in succession to it if it were——"

"Oh, I see!" broke in Mrs. Hadlow, suddenly flushed and excited. "How extraordinary of me not to have thought of that before! He had three sons, but he has lost them all; I saw in the papers that the youngest had been killed in South Africa, just before the end of the war. So naturally——"

"Poor old fellow!" said Cyril.

"Yes, dreadfully sad for him; still I am sure he must be thankful, or ought to be, that you and Hubert survive to save the family from extinction. He admits your claim to succeed him at Kingsmoreton, then?"

"Well, he seems to think that I have a sort of moral claim, though I imagine that he has some misgivings as to my suitability. Well he may! But you had better read what he says. He writes very kindly."

He wrote very sensibly, Mrs. Hadlow thought, and rather pathetically. His letter, which purported to be that of an old and failing invalid whose duty it was to take some thought for the future of his estates, had also

a subdued ring of appeal. His wife and he were sad and solitary; to invite a young man to share their melancholy solitude was doubtless to ask a favour for which no immediate equivalent could be offered. Still the county was not to be called dull, as counties went. Apart from the facilities for sport of various kinds which it afforded, it had charms of colour and outline which could not but commend themselves to the artistic eye, and there were neighbours of a more or less lively disposition within easy reach. At any rate, he was sure his correspondent would agree with him in thinking that the heir to a property, like the heir to a throne, should, if possible, familiarise himself with the aspects and conditions of his inheritance before entering upon it, and although the process might prove irksome and tedious in some respects, it would at least bring the incidental reward which attaches to all charitable actions, inasmuch as it would infuse an atmosphere of youth and cheerfulness into lives which had lost touch with both.

"Sir Martin is a trifle long-winded," observed Mrs. Hadlow, when she had come to the end of two closely written sheets; "but he sounds as if he had quite made up his mind."

"Oh, he has quite made up his mind."

"He seems to know a good deal about you, too."

"Yes, he has evidently instituted inquiries, and the upshot of them has evidently caused him some uneasiness. Satisfactory as to character and conduct, he would think, but doubtful in the matter of habits and tastes. A man of seven-and-twenty who has wandered about the Continent ever since he left school, who has

scarcely any friends but foreigners and no pursuits except art!—that doesn't give the impression of very promising material for the evolution of a country squire. Squiredom is one's destined part, I presume. Or are the estates so extensive as to raise one to the level of a territorial magnate?"

Mrs. Hadlow made no immediate response. Her faded blue eyes appeared to be scanning the ugly red-brick houses on the opposite side of Royal Avenue, the intervening bare boughs and the swirling dust which was being driven westwards by a keen February wind; but in truth her gaze was fixed upon a prospect far more pleasing and inspiriting. Ah, what a prospect!—and how unlike that grim, grey, nebulous one which it had so abruptly displaced! Clear was it to her that her poor old kinsman was not long for this world; soon would Cyril be reigning in his stead—Cyril, who, if he had given his mother many an anxious hour, had at least never been lacking in filial or fraternal affection, and whose careless liberality was a byword. Farewell to parsimony! Farewell to hateful, undignified shifts for making ends meet! Farewell to the constant sinking dread of Hubert's University bills! She saw the future bathed in roseate light; she looked out, as it were, upon a quite unpromised land flowing with milk and honey; she anticipated a more or less speedy exodus from this dreary neighbourhood, which she only inhabited because residence in London had seemed to become imperative for her children's sake. Also she beheld Margery and Lottie introduced into a society which ignores the impecunious; she married them both brilliantly in the twinkling of an

eye; she even wondered whether, after all, it would be necessary for Hubert to take up the commercial career for which he had no fancy at all, poor boy! From this beatific vision she was recalled by a renewal of Cyril's query.

"The estates?" she repeated vaguely. "Really I can't tell you, but I fancy that Sir Martin must be very well off. Let us look him up in the 'Landed Gentry.'"

The bookcase to which she had recourse did not contain that useful work of reference; but a red volume, somewhat remote in date, furnished a few particulars which she proceeded to read aloud in a murmuring voice, amplifying them with explanatory comments.

"'*Hadlow,* rt. hon. Sir Martin, P.C., G.C.S.I., born 1831, married 1860 Lady Constantia, daughter of 4th Earl of Tilehurst'—I remember being introduced to her by your poor father, a tall woman in ruby velvet and dirty diamonds, who was rather uncivil in her manner, I thought—'D.L. and J.P., Devonshire, Under Secretary for the Home department, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster,' and so forth, and so forth. Then they made him an Indian Governor, and that's how he got his G.C.S.I. It was on his return to England, I think, that he succeeded to the property; but the book doesn't say. '*Seat:* Kingsmoreton Court, Kingsmoreton, Devon. Has issue. (1) Martin, late captain Grenadier Guards'—broke his neck in a steeplechase long ago—'(2) Spencer, M.P. for Kingsmoreton division'—ah, that's the one who died of pneumonia last year—(3) 'Reginald, lieutenant 22nd Hussars'—yes, it was Reginald who was shot in South Africa. I have an

indistinct impression that he wasn't altogether satisfactory. Ran into debt or something. Not that it matters now. 'Patron of five livings'—h'm! that ought to imply a considerable number of acres, one would think. Anyhow, whether the rent-roll amounts to five thousand a year or fifty thousand, it's a splendid windfall."

"I suppose it must be called so," the heir-elect agreed a little dubiously. "At any rate, I suppose I mustn't decline to pick it up."

For a moment Mrs. Hadlow experienced the sensations of Alnaschar when he kicked over his basket of glassware and awoke from dreams of affluence to find himself penniless. Cyril, she knew, was capable of that monstrous renunciation. He was capable of great things, unaccountable things, insensate things, all manner of things. She had seldom been able to understand him, although he had often compelled her to admire him. But she did feel that he would forfeit all claim upon her admiration for ever if he should be mad enough to reject the chance of becoming a large landed proprietor for no better reason than that he personally preferred to be a struggling artist.

"It would be downright wicked to do that!" she exclaimed. "Oh, but you couldn't! If you won't think of yourself—of course you never do—think of your sisters! Think of us all!"

"Oh, I'm thinking of you all, mother," the young man returned, laughing; "it's quite obvious that this thing has got to be done. What rather alarms me is my exceptional unfitness for the job. Did you ever in

all your days meet with anybody who so little resembled an English country gentleman?"

"It's a pity," Mrs. Hadlow acknowledged, sighing, "that you don't care for field sports. English people are so apt to be prejudiced against men who neither hunt nor shoot."

Cyril shrugged his shoulders lightly. "If that were all, the outlook wouldn't be particularly formidable. Anybody, I imagine, can learn to shoot by taking a little trouble, and I already know how to ride—after a fashion. I have surmounted greater difficulties than those before now by taking trouble. There are other things, though, which can neither be learnt nor unlearnt, I'm afraid."

"But you needn't obtrude them," Mrs. Hadlow urged quickly.

"My political, social and religious opinions? No; perhaps not."

"Besides, Sir Martin is a Liberal."

"He would have to be an uncommonly advanced one to join hands with me. But never mind; I'll try to be discreet. I'll try, in short, to fulfil what looks like my manifest destiny. The situation is hardly what I should have chosen; but I accept it—since I am going to accept it—without reserve."

"Then you'll succeed," Mrs. Hadlow declared, with a sigh which this time betokened relief, not misgiving. "I must say for you, Cyril, that you always succeed in what you are determined to do."

"One can *do* things when one is determined," the young man assented. "Whether one can *be* something

that one isn't is perhaps another question. But, as I tell you, I'll try."

He was in truth no bad hand at trying, and had proved his capacity for achieving results through dogged perseverance after a fashion which justified his mother's praise and his own quiet self-reliance. If he could not as yet be said to have achieved success in his profession, that was because an unfortunate physical defect had compelled him to lay aside his painter's pallet, and because in these days fame and fortune are well-nigh impossible of attainment by wielders of the pencil or the etching-needle. From his earliest boyhood he had shown such an overwhelming passion for the pictorial art that his desire to adopt it as a means of livelihood had triumphed over the reluctance of parents and guardians, and before his father's death he had been sent abroad to complete an education which the ordinary course of public school and college training does not provide. Strange to say, it was not until his studies had been carried on in various foreign schools for some years that a discovery was made which had to be acknowledged as fatal to them so far as their most important branch went. Some extraordinary effects that he produced, at first unaccountable to himself and to others, but recurring at more and more frequent intervals, established beyond all doubt the fact that he was intermittently, capriciously colour-blind. Those fine, luminous eyes of his, which worked so admirably with his hand and were so unerring in their vision of outline and curve, played him at times the oddest tricks. He had in a high degree the sense of light and shade; he seemed to have the sense of

colour and the love of it; yet there were days when he could not have told you whether a flower was blue or lilac, whether the sky at sunset was red or yellow.

What was to be done? Evidently, a man who is liable at any moment to introduce a green horse or a brown tree into a picture has no artistic future before him, and it was unhappily the case that Cyril had been known to confuse olive-green with brown. At the outset he refused to be discouraged, persisting in the belief that by some mechanical system or other he could learn to counteract aberrations which were the more hard to deal with because they were not continuous, but appeared to be due to conditions of atmosphere or health. At length, however, after much labour and many fruitless consultations with oculists, he was forced to own himself beaten. By that time he was almost past the age for fresh starts; his mother was a widow with a small income; the very few hundreds a year which he had inherited on attaining his majority barely sufficed to feed and clothe him; it was most desirable that he should replenish the family exchequer, out of the question for him to become a burden upon it. Probably, therefore, he was wise in deciding to utilise his undeniable skill as a draughtsman for what it might be worth.

Pecuniarily, it did not prove to be worth a great deal. Still he earned a trifle here and there, and when he finally took up etching, throwing himself heart and soul into a craft which has never had many devotees of first-rate ability, a certain modest measure of celebrity began to be his recompense. He shared the home, or rather the succession of homes, which his mother, seek-

ing economy and education for her children, set up for herself in France and elsewhere; he led, upon the whole, a pleasant life, and was ever the pleasantest of company, sustained by a brave optimism which forbade him to repine over what could not be helped. He was a good son and a good brother. He formed, it was true, certain intimacies and assimilated certain views of which his mother could not approve; but she said to herself that the natural effervescence of youth must needs find an outlet in one direction or another, and that, after all, there are many more troublesome ones than the theoretical Socialism, or whatever it was, that Cyril was pleased to profess. Nor did she now feel much disquietude as to the effect of such eccentric convictions upon his future. Sir Martin was sure to like Cyril. Everybody liked Cyril, while nobody took his occasional wild pronouncements literally.

"Well," she remarked, as she rose from her chair, "I little thought when I came down to breakfast what luck was in store for us! Oh yes, I know what you are going to say; but really they *are* hatched to all intents and purposes, and even if they weren't, I couldn't refuse myself the joy of counting them. I was going to worry you with bills and estimates; but I won't do that now. I suppose," she added meditatively, "Sir Martin will make you some sort of an allowance."

"Provided that I give satisfaction. Well, I shouldn't wonder; although he doesn't say so. Meanwhile, I have ten pounds that I don't know what to do with. Not a large contribution; still every little helps."

He was accustomed to make these contributions

with such frequency that they amounted to a very substantial help in the aggregate. Upon himself he spent no more than was strictly necessary for the periodical renewal of a meagre wardrobe and for the materials of his calling. No one cared less about wealth than he did; no one minded less being poor. What he did mind was the surrender of his independence, and it is highly probable that he would have declined to make that surrender at Sir Martin's bidding, had he had his own wishes alone to consult. As matters stood, he felt that he had no alternative but to despatch a grateful and graceful reply to his would-be benefactor.

CHAPTER II.

THE HEIR AND HIS WELCOME.

About a fortnight later Cyril arrived at the wayside station of Kingsmoreton, after a six hours' journey from London, and stepped into the brougham which had been sent to meet him. Further correspondence with Sir Martin Hadlow had made it perfectly clear that he was desired and intended to regard himself as that gentleman's heir, although he was still in some doubt, and had not liked to ask point-blank, whether he was about to be received as a guest or as a permanent inmate in his future home. Very likely Sir Martin would have been unable to answer the question if it had been put to him. Willing he might be, and apparently was, to bequeath his estates to a kinsman

upon whom he had never set eyes; somebody must needs own the property after his death, and he had not unnaturally made choice of his nearest surviving relative. But one does not, after all, engage even a butler or a coachman without having first seen him, and how was Sir Martin to know that his destined successor did not squint or stammer or dress in loud checks?

South Devon, at all events, had assumed its most smiling aspect to give the stranger welcome. In London it had been cold, raw and wintry; but down here in the soft West, spring was already beginning to announce itself. The larches and the hedgerows showed tips of vivid green, the gorse upon the hillsides was golden, the banks of the deep lanes, through which Cyril was driven at a rapid pace, were decked with early wild-flowers, and every now and then he caught a glimpse of blue sea and red cliffs, fired by the setting sun. As far as natural beauty went—and it went a long way with him—he would evidently have little to grumble at. And when the carriage, passing under a stone archway, entered upon wide spaces of park-land, broken by rhododendron thickets, a cry of surprised admiration escaped its occupant. For Kingsmoreton Court, unlike the majority of west-country mansions, stands superbly on a height and displays its fine Jacobean front to the advancing visitor from a distance of a mile or more. A noble, weather-beaten building, rising above two broad, grassy terraces or bowling-greens, flanked by shrubberies, and dominating distant Kingsmoreton, which, with the harbour and the sea, is visible from its upper storeys, although Cyril,

craning his neck out of the window of the brougham, could descry only the bluish film of smoke which hung above the little town. Well, he thought to himself, this was certainly a place worth possessing—if indeed any such place could be, from his point of view, worth possessing. It was, at any rate, worth sketching. Never before in his life had he seen anything quite like it outside a picture-frame or a portfolio, and the spectacle gave him a thrill of sheer joy, such as he had hitherto associated only with cathedrals and mountain ranges.

In a few minutes he was at the entrance, and folding doors, flung wide, revealed a hall of vast proportions, oak-panelled, thickly carpeted, and warmed by a great fire of blazing logs. He had a general impression of wealth, luxury, stateliness, numerous servants, followed by a sharper and more definite sense of his personal incongruity in relation with such adjuncts. Then he found himself advancing into a comparatively small library or study and shaking hands with a white-haired, refined-looking old man, who said:

"Conventionality apart, I am very glad to see you. Is it too late to offer you a cup of tea? You don't care for tea? Sit down, then, and smoke a cigarette with me while they unpack your things. Dinner is at eight."

Sir Martin Hadlow had a kindly, simple manner, a waxen complexion, clear blue eyes and a voice of that pleasant pitch and modulation which England alone produces. Wearing neither beard nor mous-

ta che, and dressed for riding, he had the appearance of an elderly sportsman, combined with, and partially contradicted by, that of an invalid. As a matter of fact, he was both. With the object, no doubt, of setting the new-comer at ease, he talked commonplaces fluently for a minute or two, while Cyril, taking stock of him, thought to himself, "I am going to like you. Your face doesn't tell whether you are going to like me or not, though."

Sir Martin's face told nobody any more than he wanted it to tell. He was an old man and an old office-holder, who had his sentiments well under control, and who was naturally less inclined towards swift conclusions than a young artist. Probably, however, it did not take him long to discover that his cousin was a gentleman, and probably that was as much as he cared to ascertain at the outset.

"Yes, I thought you would appreciate the house," he said, in answer to an enthusiastic remark of Cyril's; "of its class it is as nearly perfect as any that I know. Like the surrounding district," he added, with a faint smile, "it suffers a little just now from being insufficiently peopled; but it has seen merry times, and will see them again, I daresay. Unfortunately, these new death-duties are playing the very deuce with country gentlemen. Or don't you agree that that is a misfortune?"

Cyril had the prudence to reply that he hardly felt competent to express an opinion as yet. Not in a first interview could he proclaim his intransigeant Radicalism, whatever honesty might compel him to avow later.

He was not pressed. Sir Martin changed the theme, chatted agreeably about art, of which he seemed to have some knowledge, about the modern French school, about etchings, engravings, mezzotints, and so forth, but did not make the most distant allusion to the circumstances under which Cyril had become his guest or to the correspondence which had passed between them. It was quite distinctly as a guest that he was being treated, Cyril felt, when, after a time, he was conducted upstairs to a spacious bedroom, where he was left to dress for dinner. He began to doubt whether his mother and his sisters had not been a little premature in bidding him farewell with tears.

Punctually on the stroke of eight he descended the broad oak staircase, at the foot of which a grave personage in black—butler or groom of the chambers or some such functionary—appeared to be waiting for him. "Her ladyship is in the saloon to-night, sir," this imposing being announced; whence Cyril drew the rapid deductions that her ladyship did not use the saloon every night, that she was doing so now because she wished him to understand that he was a stranger, and consequently that she was thus far no consenting party to her husband's scheme. The sight of the saloon, a long, tapestried chamber, illuminated by wax candles in crystal chandeliers, confirmed his foreboding, while the reception accorded to him by Lady Constantia Hadlow converted it into a certainty.

Lady Constantia, tall, gaunt, grey-headed, and clad in the deepest mourning, stood by the fire, with one foot on the fender, a formidable and forbidding figure. She held out a lifeless hand to the young man, saying

unsmilingly, "How do you do?"—after which a space of absolute silence ensued. Cyril, half abashed, half inclined to laugh, felt that he must break it if she would not; so he exclaimed:

"What a glorious room!"

Lady Constantia's curt responsive murmur seemed to imply that she thought the remark impertinent. At any rate, she made no further answer to it than that, but, dropping stiffly into a chair, pointed to a rather distant one.

"Please sit down," said she.

Cyril obeyed, inwardly resolving that the next advance should come from her, if he had to remain mute for a quarter of an hour. He was made to wait fully two minutes (which, under certain circumstances, is almost tantamount to fifteen) before she spoke again, and when she did so, it was to put a startlingly disconcerting question.

"What made you come down here?" she asked.

"Well—I was invited," Cyril replied, with a smile.

"Yes; of course."

There was another pause; after which Lady Constantia resumed: "I did not mean to be rude. I quite understand your having accepted my husband's offer to treat you as his heir; no one would have refused such an offer, and it was proper that it should be made. I was only wondering what attraction this dull, sad house could have for you."

Cyril might have answered that he had not known how dull and sad it was; or he might have signified his willingness to leave it from the moment that his presence was unwelcome; or again he might have

mentioned that the offer made to him had not related to heirship alone. But he said none of these things; for he could not help perceiving that Lady Constantia, if unmistakably hostile, really did not mean to be rude. She did not want him, that was all, and did not see what motive he could have for intruding upon the settled melancholy with which her whole aspect was instinct. He began to be sorry for the stern, unhappy-looking woman, and, although he could think of no rejoinder which would be likely to mollify her, he refrained from uttering any that could have the contrary effect.

"Such a house as this," he remarked at length, "is bound to be attractive to me, because I am an artist, and because it is so beautiful. I could live in it for a week without seeing a soul and be quite contented."

"Oh," returned Lady Constantia, staring at the fire, "could you? But perhaps by the end of a week you will have seen enough of it."

Again Cyril found himself on the brink of laughter; but at this juncture, to his great relief, Sir Martin entered, and instantly the grim features of his terrible interlocutress relaxed. Her voice, too, had quite another and a softer intonation as she addressed her husband.

"You look tired, Martin," she said anxiously; "I hope you did not ride too far this afternoon."

"I did not go outside the park, my dear," the old gentleman replied, "and I am not a bit tired. Well, here is our young man, you see. Is all this state" (with a circular wave of the hand) "in his honour?"

"The room ought to be heated and lighted sometimes," answered Lady Constantia, stiffening once more; "Mrs. Combe is glad to take advantage of the excuse of our having a visitor."

"I apologise for Mrs. Combe," said Sir Martin, laughing and laying his hand on Cyril's arm. "She ought to have known that you are not a mere visitor; but she shall be told. Meanwhile, I don't regret the opportunity of showing you how well these old tapestries light up."

Soon a door at the further extremity of the long room was thrown open and dinner was announced; but neither Sir Martin nor Lady Constantia moved, although the latter gazed at the fire with compressed lips and a deepening frown. For whom, Cyril wondered, could they be waiting? Who could be so sublimely audacious as to make that fearsome old woman wait?

The culprit who, after the lapse of a few more minutes, gratified his curiosity by making her appearance did not at first sight convey an impression of striking audacity. She was a tiny lady, whose fair hair was arranged in the most recent style, who was charmingly dressed in pale lavender brocade, and who wore three rows of large pearls round her slim, white throat. She was not remarkably pretty, nor perhaps (but this was uncertain even under a strong light) very young; but she was undeniably smart, graceful in her movements, and self-possessed. These details the observant Cyril had time to take in before Sir Martin said:

"Let me introduce you to my daughter-in-law, Mrs. Spencer Hadlow."

Mrs. Spencer gave the stranger a careless glance from beneath her lowered eyelids, bowed slightly, smiled more slightly still, and, taking Sir Martin's arm, rustled off towards the dining-room.

"Another enemy!" thought Cyril, as he followed, with Lady Constantia's fingers just touching his sleeve. "At this rate, the sooner I own myself defeated and beat a retreat the better!"

But to own himself defeated was never what he liked, and the very fact that the task in store for him threatened to prove more arduous than he had anticipated made him disinclined to relinquish it. After all, it was not he who had forced himself upon these people, and if it was admitted, as it appeared to be, that he ought to inherit the estates, there was much to be said in favour of his acquainting himself with them.

When the four took their places at a small round table in an immense dining-room, Mrs. Spencer, who spoke in a rather drawling, but not unmusical voice, was vainly trying to convince her father-in-law that all the clocks in the establishment were fast.

"I gave myself three solid quarters of an hour to dress, and I am sure that ought to be enough."

"One would think so," Sir Martin agreed.

"It is twenty-three minutes past eight, Greenwich time," said Lady Constantia, looking straight before her and addressing nobody in particular, as Cyril afterwards discovered that her habit was. "Adela's watch may be out of order, but there is a clock in her room." She

added: "When I was a girl I used to be told that unless I could be downstairs at the dinner hour, I had better not come down at all."

"But that was in the dark ages, when nobody was ever forgiven for anything," observed Mrs. Spencer amiably. "Besides, I am no longer a girl, worse luck!"

Lady Constantia vouchsafed no rejoinder. Indeed, she only opened her lips twice again in the course of a quickly-served meal, and on both occasions it was to urge her husband to eat something which he had refused. For him she had another voice; upon him, when she spoke to him, her great, woebegone black eyes rested and grew soft. As for her daughter-in-law and Cyril, she simply ignored their presence. The latter, watching her and listening to the conversation between Sir Martin and Mrs. Spencer, into which he was but occasionally drawn, took mental notes and thought he could discern the general lie of the land. Poor Lady Constantia, bereaved of her three sons, caring for nobody and nothing now in the wide world save her husband, but caring intensely for him, would naturally hate the thought that his broad acres and his magnificent old dwelling must pass ere long into the hands of strangers; naturally, therefore, she must hate the sight of his destined successor. It was, perhaps, little less natural, if somewhat less excusable, that she should detest her daughter-in-law—she obviously did detest her daughter-in-law—for being childless. Mrs. Spencer was shielded from ocular scrutiny by a high silver bowl, in which was piled up a pyramid of hothouse flowers; but a listener with Cyril's swift perceptions and acute sense

of hearing might divine that some of her bland, languid speeches were directed at, if not to, the morose lady who disdained to notice them, and were less innocent in intention than they sounded. He surmised that there were sharp claws at the end of Mrs. Spencer's velvety paws; he also surmised that a peace-loving old gentleman, flanked by two women who were ever ready to clash, might be willing to offer a high price, pecuniary or other, in return for the more or less protecting company of one of his own sex.

"Hang it!" reflected Cyril, "I'll see the poor old chap through, if I can. It's what I am here for, unless I am much mistaken."

He was sometimes mistaken, though not so often as to shake his confidence in an insight which was fairly quick and exact. After dinner, when the small party adjourned to the library, he continued his part of an intelligent observer, and found Mrs. Spencer, upon the whole, the most interesting of his three subjects, because she was rather enigmatic. About her lips there hovered perpetually a queer little smile, half demure, half ironical; she kept her eyes always half shut, which rendered her face more difficult to read; every now and then she made remarks which betrayed humour and shrewdness; but these were for Sir Martin's ears. To Lady Constantia she spoke seldom, and to the stranger not at all.

"I suppose she shows me the cold shoulder because, through no fault of my own, I supplant her late husband," thought Cyril, who was beginning to be a trifle piqued by her persistent neglect.

Something was said about whist; but as Cyril con-

fessed himself a poor and inexperienced player, the suggestion was not persevered with. Then the old people sat down to a game of piquet, while the young artist was given a portfolio of exquisite engravings, in the contemplation of which he soon became involuntarily immersed, and Mrs. Spencer slipped out of the room.

Precisely at half-past ten a move was made to the hall, where bedroom candles were lighted, and where Mrs. Spencer reappeared, bringing with her a faint but indubitable aroma of cigarette smoke. She accepted a candlestick from Cyril, while Sir Martin and Lady Constantia were holding a short confabulation apart, and, looking him in the face for the first time (her eyes were of a greenish-grey hue, he noticed)—

"Isn't it deadly?" she whispered.

The young man laughed under his breath, but did not commit himself to a verbal assent. "Is it always like this?" he ventured to ask.

"Always, except when Mr. Pickering, the parish parson, dines and makes up a rubber. Poor you! But I daresay you have courage and patience."

"I must try to take you for my model," said Cyril.

"You had better not; you might arrive at some rather odd results that way. I am glad you recognise that I set a fine example in the face of high trials, though. Good night."

Sir Martin led his guest off to a cheerful smoking-room and gave him an excellent cigar. He said:

"I wonder whether I ought to apologise. I tried to prepare you; but you probably find us more de-

pressing than you expected. Still, there will be compensations, I hope. Do you like the look of your sitting-room?"

"My sitting-room?" echoed Cyril.

"You didn't know that you had one? It opens out of your bedroom, and I think it should be large enough and light enough to be used as a studio. If not, there are plenty of other rooms at your disposal. Please give your orders to the servants as if you were at home. Or rather, please understand that you *are* at home. That is what we wish."

That might be Sir Martin's wish, but assuredly it was not Lady Constantia's, Cyril thought. However, he only said, "It is very good of you."

"Of course," Sir Martin went on, "you will want a little time to shake down. The duties of a country squire, simple as they sound, require learning when one has not been brought up to them."

"I am afraid I shall be a square peg in a round hole," Cyril felt bound to own.

"Oh, pegs can be rounded so as to fit the place for them, unless they are too small, and, if I may say so, you don't strike me as being small. Otherwise I might hesitate to say what I am going to say."

He did hesitate for a moment before resuming: "Frankly, my dear fellow, you are not here so much in order to adapt yourself to a position which you may be called upon to fill any day—though I honestly think that that is of importance—as because I want you, if you possibly can, to take the place of a son to my poor dear wife."

"Good Heavens!" thought Cyril to himself; but he made no articulate comment.

"You know," Sir Martin went on, "that we have had a great deal of sorrow, and the loss of our youngest boy has been a crushing blow to her, poor soul. There were circumstances connected with his death—he had given us some anxiety, and she thought she had been too hard upon him: but I need not go into all that. What frightens me is that when I die she will be absolutely alone, and, between ourselves, my life hangs by a thread. I have a disease of the heart which is as likely as not to snuff me out from one moment to another. Since we lost Reggie she has ceased to hold any intercourse with the outer world. I should like to have people to stay with us sometimes, but she has made that practically impossible, and, of course, a woman of her age who shuts herself up is soon forgotten by her relations and friends. Do you understand?"

"I think I understand," answered Cyril slowly, "but——"

"Yes, yes; she hasn't taken to you at first sight, you mean; it was scarcely to be expected that she would. But will you, like a good fellow, be forbearing, and bide your time? And will you please bear in mind that nothing must be said to her about South Africa or the Boer War? Personally, I am not pained by such allusions: my poor lad met his death gallantly, like a gentleman, and perhaps being so near my own end makes me less sensitive than I should be if I were younger. But to her the whole subject is unbearable; so we have been obliged to put it on the forbidden list. You'll remember, will you?"

Cyril promised to do so. He also promised, in response to further entreaties, that he would do what in him lay to grapple with the unforeseen and very unpromising mission confided to him. He could not but suspect, however, that he might almost as well have been invited to propitiate a tigress, nor was he able to credit Sir Martin with much knowledge of feminine nature in general, or of Lady Constantia's in particular. He took up to bed with him at length a chastened conviction of inadequacy, together with an increased interest in this so palpably complicated household.

CHAPTER III.

HINTS FOR THE NEOPHYTE.

It is a well-established axiom in affairs of the heart that a lover who casts himself abjectly at the feet of an obdurate mistress must expect to be trampled upon for his pains, and perhaps what is true of victims of the tender passion applies also to those who only seek to overcome an elderly lady's prejudices. Cyril, at all events, judged that fair words were likely to avail him little in making headway with Lady Constantia, and his determination to open the campaign by taking no more notice of her than he could help did not falter when he came down to breakfast the next morning and found her seated behind the urn, grave and alone. Sir Martin, she announced, was not feeling very well and had been persuaded to rest for another hour or two. Her tone seemed to imply that her husband's indis-

position might be in some way due to the advent of a fresh inmate in the house; but the intruder resisted an inclination to apologise.

"Adela," she went on, "always breakfasts in her bedroom. It is one of her disgusting habits. Please help yourself; there are hot dishes on the sideboard."

"Are Mrs. Spencer Hadlow's habits disgusting?" inquired Cyril, doing as he was bidden.

Lady Constantia's solemn black eyes rested for a moment upon her questioner, who did not flinch beneath their scrutiny. "I think them so," she answered curtly. "It is a matter of opinion, no doubt."

Then followed a long period of silence, during which her ladyship munched dry toast and contemplated space. Eventually she resumed:

"Sir Martin wished me to tell you that a horse will be saddled for you at any hour you like. Or you can have a dogcart if you prefer it. He had intended to take you to the home farm and show you a part of the estate this morning; but one of the grooms will go with you."

"I would rather wait until Sir Martin feels better, thanks," answered Cyril. "What I should like best would be to go out for a walk presently and explore the neighbourhood on my own account."

Lady Constantia inclined her head slightly. She had delivered the message entrusted to her and had apparently no personal suggestions to offer. She ate next to nothing, Cyril noticed; she was, so far as he could gather, quite unaffected, one way or the other, by his vicinity, certainly unembarrassed by it. Her whole attitude was that of one too profoundly unhappy

to think or care about immediate surroundings. As soon as he had finished a meal over which he was not tempted to linger unduly, he pushed back his chair, and she at once rose.

"Luncheon is at two o'clock," said she, and with that left the room.

Damping as all this was, the young man's spirits rose when he had found his hat and stick, had lighted a pipe and was marching briskly across the grassy slopes and hollows of the park in the direction of the town, which he had decided upon as the best object for preliminary investigation. It was a brilliantly sunny day; the sky was of an almost Italian blue; the air, though soft by comparison with the harsh, grey atmosphere of London, had a touch of crispness in it, and a missel-thrush was singing lustily somewhere in the adjoining woods. Like the philosopher that he occasionally was, Cyril dismissed worries and problems from his mind to give himself up to the enjoyment of his senses.

For anyone who was prepared to adopt that wise course Kingsmoreton had ample rewards to supply. A gentle descent of a mile and a half, or thereabouts, brought the explorer within sight of the wooded valley down which the little river Tarvy winds a leisurely course towards the sea. Beneath him, on either bank of the broadening estuary, a jumble of white cottages, thatched roofs and paths of extraordinary steepness, paved with cobble-stones, dropped to the water's edge; beyond them was a sheltered harbour, at the quays of which one or two coasting schooners of antiquated build appeared to be discharging cargo, and beyond

that again, glittering in the sunshine, and ruffled by a light breeze, stretched the open sea, whither a small fleet of trawlers with red-brown sails was just putting forth. Cyril's hand dipped instinctively into the bulging pocket of his loose coat, wherein a sketch-book always lurked. But upon second thoughts he preferred to walk on and make closer acquaintance with this quaint picturesque congeries of human dwellings, which amounted to something more than a village and was, as a matter of fact, a market town, boasting of some five thousand inhabitants together with a Mayor and a Town Hall, besides giving its name to a Parliamentary division and offering, down on the beach below its eastern headland, attractions to summer visitors in the shape of six bathing-machines and a hideous little stucco-faced hotel of recent construction.

Kingsmoreton, on nearer inspection, might have been cleaner, might have been less redolent of fish, and would have been more agreeable to a pedestrian if its precipitous streets, degenerating in places into sheer stairways, had not been so cruelly paved. Also it seemed a pity that municipal prudence was visibly banishing thatched roofs in favour of cold, grey slates. Red tiles, Cyril thought, would have saved the situation. Still he found plenty to delight his eyes in gables, whitewash and ancient black beams, while giant fuchsias and myrtles in tiny gardens, no less than the dark complexions of the inhabitants, lent a strange air of southernness to a region which lies within the latitude of Newfoundland. There was a fine old church, too, which he entered, finding the door open,

and discovered to be Norman, Early English and Transition in architecture, with a really magnificent stone screen between the chancel and the nave. Upon the more modern—or rather the only modern—quarter of the place, consisting of the hotel above-mentioned and a handful of jerry-built lodging-houses, he made haste to turn his back; after which he scaled the heights once more, getting quite hot in the process. He promised himself that he would pay Kingsmoreton another visit soon; for the time being he was not sure whether he ought not to go back to the Court, in case Sir Martin should be looking for him.

But as there was no sign of Sir Martin or anybody else in the library or the hall when he returned, he strolled out onto the terrace and, seating himself on the granite balustrade which divided it from the upper bowling-green, began to make a rapid sketch of the great sunlit building, with its jutting wings, its clustered chimneys, its mullioned windows and the abundant creepers which added to its charm in one sense, if they somewhat marred the symmetry of its lines. He had been thus occupied for nearly half an hour when Mrs. Spencer Hadlow, smartly attired in a costume of French grey, emerged from a side door and approached him.

"Good morning," said she, nodding in a friendly and familiar manner. "Well, how are you getting on?"

The young man rose, and took off his hat. "Rather badly, thank you," he answered. "It is one of the hardest things in the world to get the general effect of masses of masonry like this in a few strokes. I haven't managed to get it a bit."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of the picture," she returned, "but let's see the picture."

She held out her hand for the sketch-book and examined his work, with her head on one side, for a minute. "Now I should call that extraordinarily good and clever," was her verdict, "but you probably despise the praise of an ignoramus."

"Not when it is sincere," replied Cyril, smiling: for he knew that hers could not be that, inasmuch as what he had accomplished so far must needs leave anybody save an expert cold.

She laughed a little. Laughter enhanced her attractiveness, for she had good teeth and a dimple at one corner of her mouth. Furthermore, it became certain in that strong light that, whatever else might or might not be genuine about her, her complexion was a birthright.

"Anyhow," she returned, "I am sincerely curious to hear how you are getting on with the inside of the house. I should think you might find that a rather harder nut to crack than the outside."

"You didn't give me much help towards breaking the shell last night," Cyril observed.

"Not very much, did I? But you see, in the first place, nobody could have helped you to any purpose; and in the second, I wanted to have the mild amusement of watching you and my mother-in-law together."

"I hope the spectacle repaid you."

"Well, no; I can't say that it did. The fact is that I am not ill-natured enough."

"Of course," said Cyril, "I am an interloper; I

don't wonder at your wishing me to be put to confusion. But——"

She checked him with a wave of her little gloved hand.

"Oh dear, no! you're on the wrong track altogether. I'm not against you; I haven't any reason to be. On the contrary, now that I have taken stock of you to the best of my humble ability, I think you are quite nice and I wish you well—if that were any use. It isn't though."

"You think that I am foredoomed to failure, then?"

"That depends upon what you attempt. I warn you that you will do no good with my mother-in-law."

"Sir Martin hopes that I shall be like a son to her," observed Cyril, smiling ruefully.

Mrs. Spencer broke forth into a peal of laughter. "Oh no!—you don't mean that he told you that? How inimitable of him!" And then with an air of pensive compassion, "Poor old cockatoo!"

"Perhaps he is ridiculous, but he doesn't strike me that way," said Cyril. "And he is more than kind."

"Oh, he is a dear! I'm devoted to him, though he has no great affection for me. But it *is* rather funny of him to suppose that sons can be supplied like clothes or groceries—come! Suppose you had lost what you cared for most in the world, how would you like it if somebody were to pat you on the head and say, 'Well, never mind! Don't cry and I'll get you another one?'"

"Did Lady Constantia care more for her youngest son than anybody else in the world?"

"I doubt whether she cared much about any of her sons. As for Reggie, the truth is that he was a bad

lot, and she never concealed her contempt for him. But that doesn't make her less inconsolable or less determined to end her days in a wilderness. The very utmost that you will ever get from her will be toleration. Whether she will get that from you is a rather interesting question."

"My present feeling," said Cyril, after meditating for a moment, "is that I am going to have a good try. I owe as much as that to Sir Martin, who I believe really wants me to stay. Besides, as I told you last night, your example will be an encouragement to me. Probably you find the atmosphere of this place even more uncongenial than I shall; yet you manage to live here."

"Bless your soul, I don't live here!—Heaven forbid! I only come down from time to time to stay with the old people. That's my invincible good nature."

"I should think you were good-natured," observed Cyril, surveying her with a smile.

"Thank you. Now let me make a bid for a still higher place in your esteem, by confessing honestly that I have another motive for doing periodical penance. A motive which is of interest to my banker and my unconscionable, but unequalled dressmaker. I can't find it in my heart to leave her, and it's certain that I could never pay her if the dear old man didn't help me out."

"I see," said Cyril.

Mrs. Spencer sighed and shook her head. "I'm very much afraid you don't," she returned. "And you an artist!"

She fell back a few paces and threw herself into a graceful pose, looking at him over her shoulder.

"Now just study it," she said, "and study it intelligently, if you can."

"It's divine," Cyril declared, without hesitation.

"It's all that, only your face tells me that you wouldn't know it from the product of a ready-made slop-shop. Constantia, who thinks I ought to be still in weeds, would be a good deal more appreciative."

"Do you address her as 'Constantia?'" inquired Cyril wonderingly.

"Do I look—does she look—as if such a thing could be remotely possible? No; I have never, that I can remember, called her anything but 'you.' I couldn't presume to call her 'mother,' and 'Lady Constantia' would be absurd, so she remains anonymous."

"But appreciative?"

"Of my costume? Well, she would be, if she saw it, and that's why I don't mean her to set eyes upon me to-day."

"Aren't you going to appear at luncheon, then?" asked Cyril, a little disappointed.

"In this hat? How you give yourself away by asking such a question! No, I am going to lunch at Mannington with your future wife."

"Who is my future wife, please?" inquired the young man, raising his eyebrows.

"Oh, I don't say that she is inevitable. There's always the possibility of your breaking down and cutting the whole show. But supposing you do stand manfully to your guns and accept what you are asked to accept, Mabel Penrose looks like an almost necessary consequence. She is the only child of old Mr. Penrose of Mannington, who is the M.F.H. and the second biggest personage hereabouts,

He will approve; so will Sir Martin; and so, most likely, will she herself, provided you make some concessions to her sporting tastes."

"I am afraid I may fail to give satisfaction in that respect. Is she pretty?"

"That's what you will have to tell me when you have seen her. I never know whether girls are pretty or not until I have heard what men think of them. But she is very nice."

"I am glad of that, anyhow," Cyril remarked. "But why am I to marry her, I wonder?"

"Only because she is so clearly indicated—though, to be sure, that may have the effect of putting you off. Did I hear wheels?"

And at this juncture a footman coming out of the house to announce that the carriage was at the door, the little lady moved away, with a parting nod and a wave of the hand.

Cyril devoutly wished that she had offered to take him with her; a wish which became intensified when he entered the library shortly afterwards, and when Lady Constantia, who was writing letters, looked round for a moment to mention that Sir Martin was still too unwell to come downstairs. Presently, however, to his great relief, a second *tête-à-tête* was averted by the advent of Mr. Pickering, the Rector of Kingsmoreton, a pleasant, rosy-cheeked, elderly cleric, with whom he was soon upon friendly terms. Mr. Pickering had been sitting with the invalid, and reported that there was not very much the matter this time.

"I daresay you will find him quite fit for his rubber this evening, now that you have a fourth."

"Mr. Cyril Hadlow does not play whist," said Lady Constantia in sepulchral accents.

Cyril wondered whether she proposed to speak of him always in that full-length style. He hastened to explain that he was capable of taking a hand in default of a better player, but that he could not pretend to be anything but a duffer.

"You are a bridge player, no doubt," observed the Rector. "Well, I'm rather fond of a game of bridge myself; only it's as much as my place is worth to say so in this house. We are desperately conservative here, though some of us call ourselves Liberal Unionists."

"You don't," returned Lady Constantia, with the ghost of a smile; "you have been a malignant Tory all your life."

Cyril subsequently discovered that political topics were amongst the very few that moved her to intermittent interest. In her far-away youth she had been an ardent politician, and every now and then it was still possible to rouse a spark by stirring those dead embers of the past. Doubtless the worthy Mr. Pickering was aware of that, and had spoken with intention. While disposing of a hearty luncheon he contrived to keep conversation alive, although he could not induce his two neighbours to address one another directly. Lady Constantia evidently liked him; she grew perceptibly more human under his mellowing influence; once or twice he even succeeded in getting a short, rather unmirthful laugh out of her. When she retired—which she did as soon as the coffee was brought in—he said half deprecatingly:

"I have known our good friends here for the best

part of forty years. Naturally, you can never know them as well as I do; still I hope it may not be very long before you realise how excellent they both are, in spite of some surface roughnesses."

"I don't think anybody could accuse Sir Martin of being rough," said Cyril.

Mr. Pickering laughed. "Of course not," he agreed. "I only used the plural number because he is to some extent answerable for singularities which you must have noticed. He has been in rather too great a hurry, perhaps; it doesn't follow that a man is at the point of death because he has had two or three attacks of angina pectoris. However, he chooses to take it for granted he is doomed; so, with the best intentions in the world, he makes it difficult for his wife to treat you civilly at the outset."

"Her daughter-in-law has been explaining that to me," observed Cyril.

"She has, eh? Clever, agreeable woman, Mrs. Spencer; but——"

"But what?" Cyril inquired when he stopped short.

"But it is a thousand pities she has no children," went on Mr. Pickering, whose sentence may not have been originally intended to end in that way. "Her husband was an able, hard-working fellow who would have made a name for himself if he had lived. Ah, well! there are good reasons for everything that happens, if we did but know what they are."

"At that rate," remarked the young man, "I may hope that there is some good reason for my being here."

"Not a doubt of it, my dear sir. Likewise there are reasons for poor Lady Constantia's churlishness; some good, or at any rate patent; others which I won't particularise. One thing I can tell you for your guidance; she is absolutely honest and straightforward. Which, according to my experience, is more than can be said for nine women out of ten."

"Perhaps you are a bachelor," Cyril smilingly suggested.

"I have the misfortune to be a widower, which is probably neither here nor there. But I am a High Church parson, and I think it my duty to hear confessions when I am asked. That is why I know something about women, and why I have the highest esteem and respect for Lady Constantia, who, as an old-fashioned Evangelical, thinks I ought to be burnt at the stake. Shall we join her now, or would you rather make your escape?"

"Well, if you don't mind, I'll leave the risk of immediate martyrdom to you," answered Cyril, laughing. "I don't think my absence is likely to be resented."

"To tell you the truth, I don't think it is. All will come right in time, you'll see. At the bottom of her heart she wouldn't like to burn either my body or yours, and if you find your ears burning presently, you will know that it is because I am giving you a good character. Look me up one of these days when you are near the Rectory and haven't anything better to do. I may be able to be of use to you in some ways, if you will allow me."

CHAPTER IV.

THE RECTOR'S RABBITS.

When Cyril had spent ten days at Kingsmoreton Court, he was able to post a reassuring despatch to his mother, from whom he had heard twice, and who was pardonably eager to be reassured. What afforded him sincere pleasure, and was likely to do as much for the recipient of his letter, was that he could enclose in it a substantial remittance. Sir Martin had large ideas respecting the pecuniary allowance to which heirs-presumptive are entitled, and in making known his intention of trebling his own heir-presumptive's income he had turned a deaf ear to thanks and protests, saying smilingly, "It is no more than you ought to have, and I don't think you will find the least difficulty in spending it."

He would have been quite sure that there would be none if he had seen the cheque which Cyril made haste to draw in favour of an embarrassed lady.

"Anyhow," the young man wrote, after giving a somewhat lengthy description of his new home and its denizens, "I am off your hands. I can't as yet call myself a success, and it is hardly in the nature of things that I should ever be more than a qualified one; but it seems to be understood now, even by the reluctant Lady Constantia, that I am a fixture. You need not be afraid of my compromising a future which is of course brilliant in a material sense and to which I was resolved from the first to reconcile myself. I am

behaving very nicely; I go to church on Sundays, with the mental reservations of Naaman the Syrian, and am careful not to incur the suspicion of moral leprosy by saying how the stark feudalism which prevails hereabouts startles and shocks me. Nobody would have the vaguest notion of what I could possibly mean if I did; so that makes it the more easy to hold one's tongue. Nobody, that is, except Mrs. Spencer Hadlow, who understands all that is said to her and a good deal that isn't. She and I have made friends upon a common basis of suppressed insubordination, and find one another useful and comforting as safety-valves when we are out of other people's hearing. She is away just now on a visit, but is to return shortly, I am glad to say. What I shall do when she betakes herself to London, where she lives, I can't think. Meanwhile, my education progresses, and I begin to see what is demanded of the kind of person that I am to be—the kind of person that I am, for the present, so lamentably far from being!

"You were right about field sports. They are indispensable, and if the love of them can't be acquired, some show or pretence of it must. Consequently, I have already been out hunting, escorted and instructed by Sir Martin, who, on account of his weak heart, is no longer allowed to follow the hounds, but who knows the country so well that he and his cob generally contrive to see a good deal of every run. Even his never-failing politeness could not carry him quite the length of praising my horsemanship, though it prevented him from ascribing my courage (which he did praise) to ignorance. He recommended me to leave

my very sagacious and well-broken animal alone, which I accordingly did, with the gratifying result that I did not tumble off once, and witnessed the death of two foxes—a rather disgusting sight, if it were permissible to own what one thought of it. The only unlucky incident of this first day was that one of the hounds got under my horse's feet; whereupon Mr. Penrose, the Master, attacked me in language so extraordinarily insulting and blasphemous that self-respect would have compelled me to send him my seconds if we had been in any other country than England. However, everybody seemed to think it was all right, and afterwards he asked me to lunch. He is a jolly, red-faced old gentleman, who looks like a survival of the John Leech era, and his pretty daughter enjoys a high reputation as a Diana in these parts. Mrs. Spencer declares that it is alike my destiny and my duty to marry the daughter; but I don't think Miss Penrose is of that opinion.

"Hunting in this land of woods and precipitous hillsides does not much resemble one's preconceived idea of the thing, derived from a casual study of sporting prints. You get a certain amount of galloping, which is exciting while it lasts; but you don't fly over the high banks like a bird, as the red-coated sportsmen in the coloured prints do; Sir Martin tells me you couldn't. On approaching these obstacles, your horse cocks his ears, slackens his pace to a trot, and proceeds to execute a cat-like scramble to the narrow top, slithering down somehow or other on the opposite side, while you sit precariously on his shoulders (at least I do) and lose both your stirrups. Then by

a series of frantic acrobatic struggles you find your way back into the saddle and the chase is resumed. Bringing an impartial judgment to bear upon the pursuit of the fox, I recognise that it has features which would be exhilarating to most people; but I can't at present see the necessity for fox or hounds. It seems to me that scattered scraps of paper would answer all the purpose. I am sorry I said this to Sir Martin, though, as it evidently pained him.

"Shooting, happily, is at an end for this season; but Mr. Pickering, the Rector, with whom I have held sundry consultations, is of opinion that I ought to have some practice, in preparation for next autumn, and suggests that I should make a start by helping his factotum to keep down the rabbits, which, it appears, infest his small property on the outskirts of Kingsmoreton. The factotum, Jacob Beer by name, is a queer old fellow, with a face so exquisitely wrinkled that I burn to reproduce it in pen and ink, and I hope to obtain his consent to my doing so, provided that I ingratiate myself with him by slaying a sufficient number of rabbits. He assures me that it is impossible to miss them; but personally I should hesitate to set any limit to my capacity for failing to hit a moving object—or a stationary one either, for the matter of that."

The above excerpts will serve to show that if Cyril was, and was conscious of being, a good deal out of harmony with his surroundings, he was animated by a commendable spirit in handling them. It may further be inferred that his efforts up to the time of writing had not gone wholly unrewarded, since they

had earned him a perceptible measure of goodwill. Mr. Pickering, for one, had taken a decided fancy to the young man, whose instruction in the use of fire-arms he himself would gladly have superintended, had he not been very busy just then with Lenten services and the preparation of candidates for confirmation. He had, however, full confidence in Jacob Beer, who had for many years managed his small farm, and whose labours were not so heavy but that they could be varied at any time by a few hours' rabbiting. He was therefore somewhat surprised when, on the day appointed for the shoot, he climbed the hill after evensong in quest of the sportsmen and met old Jacob plodding homewards alone, with a gun under each arm and a countenance expressive of deep dejection.

"Hullo, Jacob!" said he, "what have you done with Mr. Hadlow? Has he had enough of it?"

"If he hevn't, sir," returned the old man, "I can tell 'ee who hev'! Aw dear, aw dear! what iver could 'ee hav' bin thinkin' about, fur to send me out with such a mazed young feller as that!"

"I warned you that he was a beginner," said the Rector. "Well, he missed everything, I suppose?"

"'Twadn't that—no such luck! A got one rabbit with 's first shot; let drive at un when a was so nigh as I be to yu now; so yu may b'lieve there warn't nothing fur to pick up. Well, a didn't get no more rabbits, but a've killed both tu ferrets and a've shotted the old dog——"

"Shot old Ben?" ejaculated the Rector, aghast. "Good heavens! I wouldn't have had this happen for a five-pound note!"

"Ben havn't tuk no 'arm to siggerfy, bein' in coat just now, as luck would hev' it; but a was peppered proper, I tell 'ee! Next thing was — now what I'm tellin' of 'ee 's th' truth—a fired at a wood pigeon; loosed off both tu barr'ls at once, and come nigh knockin' hisself silly with th' stock. Aw, 'twas something crool! Shotted the boy tu—a's bliddin' all down 's trousers," added Jacob as an afterthought.

"Mercy upon us! The boy isn't badly hurt, I hope?"

"No fear! What's not wanted 's niver lost, as I telled un. Sarve th' young varmint right fur not kapin' be'ind th' gun, same as I did. Though I reely shouldn't like to say as 'twas safe even then. Howsumever, th' young gen'leman give un a suv'rin, and a's that rackless I du b'lieve a'd stand up and be fired at agin fur another."

"Well, you seem to have had a spirited time of it amongst you," observed the Rector; "but we must be thankful that things are no worse. And what has become of this wholesale young murderer?"

"Gone up to Dr. Lee's with th' boy fur to 'ave th' pellets tuk out of un. Now I will say this, a more pleasanter-spoken young gen'leman I couldn't wish to meet; but I don't go out a rabbitin' with he no more, not for nothin' yu could offer me! An' if yu'll be advised by me, passon, yu won't put a gun in 's 'and agin, not without yu'm sartain that there bain't no cartridge in it."

Mr. Pickering owned that the advice was sound. He added, "I think, Jacob, the less we say about today's work the better. I shouldn't like the Squire to hear of it."

The old man shook his head emphatically. "Squire sha'n't 'ear nowt from me, sir, an' if the boy don't keep 's mouth shut I'll twist th' neck of un. But somebody's got to warn Kaper afore next September for sartain sure. Lor', to think o' that theer young feller walkin' along in line or waitin' alongside a cover for somethin' to stir! — why, 'tis enough to fraze your blood!"

"Oh, of course. But I hope to make another man of him before the autumn. Meanwhile, I will take care that no more lives are endangered."

Continuing his walk, Mr. Pickering presently encountered Cyril, who said:

"I was on my way to the Rectory to make confession and crave absolution. We have had a series of mishaps, I am sorry to tell you."

"I have just been hearing about them from Jacob," answered Mr. Pickering. "He vows that this shall be his last day's rabbiting with you."

"He can't be more decided as to that than I am. It was unpardonable, no doubt, although I don't yet understand why if you fire at a rabbit on one side of a hedge, you should wound somebody on the other. Do guns generally conduct themselves like that?"

"A little depends on whether they are held straight or not; still shot has a tendency to scatter, and many a man has lost his sight through a ricochet off a twig. I don't want to be uncivil, my dear fellow, but the fact is——"

"Oh, the facts would justify any amount of incivility. Fortunately, they can't be repeated, for I have

been thinking it over, and I have quite made up my mind that I must abjure shooting."

"It's early days to say that. With a little patience and perseverance——"

"That's not what I mean. I'm patient and persevering, or I'm nothing, and it isn't the difficulty of learning to hold a gun straight that stops me, it's an invincible repugnance for the sport itself. I don't like killing things."

"I never should have supposed so after your exploits of to-day," remarked Mr. Pickering drily; "still, if you have conscientious objections to taking life, they must be respected."

"I don't know that my objections are conscientious. It may be all right to shoot pheasants and partridges and hares; I daresay it is. But I am not bound to be a butcher because it is all right to slaughter sheep and oxen."

"Not in the least; but I almost think you will be bound at some future time to preserve game, and at least invite your neighbours to shoot your birds for you."

"Of course I shall. It will be my clear duty to carry on established traditions and assimilate them to the best of my poor power. I can get up a sort of an interest in Jerseys and Shorthorns; I am genuinely interested—a little too much so perhaps—in the agricultural labourer; I shall soon manage to ride to hounds as well as another, and I'm studying parish law and the education problem. I really am trying to qualify for my duties."

The Rector nodded. "Yes, I know you are, though some of them go rather against the grain."

"Ah, that's inevitable. Temperament and habit, you see, have made me an artist, and very little else; but by means of the patience and perseverance which you advocate I may turn myself into a colourable imitation of something else. I'm sorry about the shooting; still, it's as well to recognise what one's limitations are."

"It is as well to recognise that compromise is the mainspring of a smooth existence."

"Well, I'm prepared to compromise upon almost all points, unless — but I hope nothing of the sort will happen—I should be brought face to face with some question of direct truth or falsehood. One is bound to make a stand there, don't you think so?"

"Yes, if you have satisfied yourself that you can draw the requisite distinction. Until then there is great virtue in silence."

"Is that how you dispose of Noah's ark, I wonder? I beg your pardon; it was impertinent of me to say that, but it slipped out."

Mr. Pickering did not take offence. "Of course," he answered, "I can't tell how far your researches into the authenticity of Old Testament history may have extended; but I should be inclined to suspect that Noah's ark was precisely one of those subjects upon which you could make no mistake by keeping silence yet awhile. At all events, you won't be invited to make any pronouncement about it by Sir Martin, who has a broad mind, though he has never himself been troubled with doubts."

Cyril laughed. "Religion may be shirked, you mean; but how about politics?"

"Ah, there you get a field of controversy which simply bristles with compromises from the moment that it takes practical shape. In this country Republicanism isn't a practical question, so you can remain as uncompromising a Republican as you like without the slightest necessity for proclaiming your creed."

"Well, happily it doesn't seem to have entered into Sir Martin's plans to put me forward as a candidate for Parliament. Now I must go home and make humble avowal to him of the day's misdeeds."

"Don't do that, don't do that!" Mr. Pickering protested with some earnestness. "You will only distress him, and Jacob Beer has promised to keep mum."

"Oh, I must; I am certain to be asked. Besides, when Sir Martin hears how withering my fire has been, he may be reconciled to my leaving guns alone for the future. So, I am sure, must you and Jacob Beer be. By the way, when Jacob has forgiven me, I want him to give me a few sittings for his portrait. I am fabulously rich now, so I can afford to pay almost as much as it is worth for a face like his."

Mr. Pickering gazed at the young man's retreating figure and sighed rather wistfully. "Not a bad fellow," he mused, "not at all a bad fellow. We have caught him too late, though, I fear. The best thing he could do would be to fall in love with some nice, thoroughly English girl, like Mabel Penrose. But I don't suppose she would look at him; he isn't her sort at all."

Whether he was or was not "her sort," she had been placed at a disadvantage, so far as her prospects of captivating him went, by the indiscretion of Mrs. Spencer Hadlow. No man is likely to be predisposed in favour of a lady who has been selected for him by his well-wishers, nor had Cyril much inclination for matrimony in the abstract. On the occasion of their one meeting, however, he had paid the tribute of a dispassionate admiration to Miss Penrose, whose perfectly modelled figure showed to the best advantage on horseback, and whose grey eyes, fresh, healthy skin and hair of the bronze shade beloved by painters had seemed to him to constitute a valid claim to beauty. He had had a little conversation with her, too, and had found her pleasantly unaffected. She had given him the impression of a refreshingly old-fashioned girl, who would not try to flirt with those who had neither taste nor aptitude for that form of diversion.

This appreciation, it may be said at once, did her no more than justice, and it was assuredly not of set purpose that she emerged from the tortuous streets of Kingsmoreton, driving herself in a high dogcart, just as Cyril struck the main road, so that, in turning the corner, a brown-paper parcel rolled out from between her feet and was rescued from the ditch by him. She pulled up, thanked him for restoring her property to her, and said:

"You are a friend in need. This horse won't stand, and I shouldn't have dared to get out with nobody to go to his head, so it's lucky you were there."

"Very glad I was," Cyril declared. "Have you been shopping?"

"Oh yes," she answered with a little sigh. "Somebody must do these things, and my father insists upon employing local tradesmen; but it's rather a waste of a fine afternoon. And how have you been spending it?"

"In disgracing myself," the young man ruefully replied.

Something about her—an undefinable suggestion of friendliness, the presence or absence of which in a stranger his quick sensibility always enabled him to detect—encouraged him to tell her the whole disastrous story, at which she laughed aloud.

"Well," she remarked, "there's nothing like taking one's calamities in the lump. You can hardly be so unfortunate next time."

"There isn't going to be a next time, though," said Cyril, who thereupon imparted to her the resolution which he had already announced to Mr. Pickering.

Miss Penrose was sorry to hear that. In a few words, she stated her view of the subject, which, as he had to acknowledge, was a commonsense one.

"Sport is cruel; I don't see any good in disputing that. Still it gives employment to a lot of people, and keeps a lot more out of mischief. So long as you kill your birds clean——"

"Which I certainly shouldn't, if I hit them at all."

"Ah, then, of course!—But everybody ought to begin by practising at a mark. And you must remember that if you cut these creatures' lives short, you give them their lives too. If there were no fox-hunting there would be no foxes, and if pheasants and partridges were not preserved they would very soon

become extinct. Supposing you knew that you were to die at an early age, would you prefer never to have been born?"

"So far as it goes, that's a sound argument in favour of the game laws, which I wasn't attacking," observed Cyril; "it doesn't affect my personal dislike to killing anything. However, I concede you your foxes, because I presume that I am not likely to be called upon to slay a fox with my own hands."

"Come, that's something!" said the girl, laughing good-humouredly. "It isn't essential, after all, that you should shoot; in these days plenty of men who aren't first-class shots prefer to leave the big shoots alone. But if an idea were to get abroad that you disapproved of fox-hunting on humanitarian grounds, I am afraid your popularity would suffer. Which would be a pity."

"It is very good of you to take an interest in that question," said Cyril, who honestly thought that it was.

She coloured slightly. The truth was that Mrs. Spencer had spoken as indiscreetly to her as to Cyril, and, remembering this, it occurred to her that her words were open to misconstruction.

"Oh, we're all interested in you," she returned; "naturally we are." Then, "You're coming to lunch with us on Thursday, aren't you?" she asked, and, gathering up her reins, drove away.

CHAPTER V.

HOSPITABLE NEIGHBOURS.

NOBODY to-day—or, at all events, only a minority too insignificant to be considered—wishes to abolish the heavy penalties inflicted upon the owners of land for dying. With an annual national expenditure approaching a hundred and forty millions and with a national distaste for indirect taxation which there seems to be no overcoming, those who neither possess nor expect to inherit land may be pardoned for viewing with tempered regret the inevitable disappearance of a class which has rendered considerable services to the country in its time. That vanishing class was worthily typified by old Mr. Penrose of Mannington, whose brick-red face, short white whiskers and broad Devonshire speech were familiar and affectionately welcomed throughout his native county. He had been Master of the local hounds for a period longer than any active member of the hunt could recall; he still rode as straight as a fifteen-stone weight would allow him to do; he thoroughly understood and performed his duties as a magistrate; he read the lessons every Sunday morning in a voice audible outside the church; he knew every man, woman and child in the parish and resided for ten months out of the twelve in the rambling white house where he exercised a constant and cheerful hospitality. Without being rich, he was comfortably off, and of course, as some of his less fortunate neigh-

bours were wont to remark with a sigh, there was no need for him, who had but one child and she a girl, to undertake the well-nigh impossible task of laying by something every year out of revenue.

Whether he esteemed himself more fortunate than they in that Providence had denied him male issue may be doubted: it would hardly have been in human nature for the representative of a line which had held the Mannington estates in fee simple for three centuries to account that a blessing. But nobody had ever heard him repine; whereas everybody within a twenty-mile radius had very frequently heard him sing the praises of a young lady who indeed had done a good deal to earn them. He did not say (although he thought) that she was far and away the best-looking girl in Devonshire; but he did say aloud that for sound sense, unfailing good temper, knowledge of horses and hounds and management of a household she had not her equal in that county or out of it. Sometimes he would add that if there was a man anywhere who deserved the luck of winning her for his wife, he had not come across that man yet.

However, he was growing old, and Mabel was out of her 'teens, and marry she must, he supposed. Of late, therefore, he had been asking himself whether the young fellow of whom poor Martin Hadlow had made choice to succeed him at Kingsmoreton was at all likely to prove suitable as a prospective son-in-law. That that young fellow should have opened acquaintance with him by riding over one of his hounds was certainly an inauspicious incident; yet the culprit's frank confession that he knew nothing about the rules or

customs of the hunting-field had mollified an old gentleman who could appreciate modesty and candour. Besides, he had rather liked Cyril's face and had noted that he was a bold rider, if an unskilled one. Something might surely be made of him, while it was probably no fault of his that his previous training had been carried on in foreign parts.

"Well, I'm glad I asked him to lunch," was the audible outcome of ruminations in which Mr. Penrose had been engaged at the breakfast-table. "We shall soon find out what he's fit for, and if he's fit for anything, we ought to be able to give him a helping hand. He must be in need of one, poor lad! I've known Martin Hadlow all my life, and a kinder soul doesn't breathe, but I couldn't be paid myself to live in his house nowadays."

"There's Adela," observed Mabel.

"Adela be hanged!" growled Mr. Penrose, who had no liking for the variety of modern Englishwoman illustrated by Mrs. Spencer Hadlow.

"But, Uncle Jim, she's adorable!" protested the third person present.

This was Violet Ord, Mr. Penrose's orphaned niece, who since her mother's death had been begged to look upon Mannington as her home, and who did so regard it except during the greater part of the year, when she found other places of sojourn more to her taste. She was a vivacious little person, with dark eyes, a low, broad forehead, above which her hair grew very prettily, a short nose and rather full lips, which were generally curved into a smile. She could not compare in respect of looks with her sister Lady Tilehurst, and

she often complained that that celebrated beauty drew all her most desirable admirers away from her; yet it was difficult to be in her company five minutes and believe in the literal truth of that assertion.

"Then all I can say, my dear," returned Mr. Penrose, "is that it's high time she gave up being anything of the sort. Why, the woman must be forty if she's a day! Gambles all night and smokes in her bedroom, too, I'm told. That's no way to get yourself adored by decent men, you may depend upon it."

Miss Violet, who was not herself wholly guiltless of either of the objectionable practices alluded to, was declaring that every woman, decent or indecent, smoked cigarettes now when Mabel hastily interrupted her by striking in with—

"Bob Luscombe and his mother are coming to lunch, too. Mrs. Luscombe wants you to advise her about Bob, father; she is afraid of his setting up a racing stable and ruining himself over it."

"She won't take my advice," Mr. Penrose predicted; "she never does. I shall advise her to give the fellow his head and let him learn wisdom by experience. Especially as he's of age and she can't stop him. But there isn't much use in talking sense to people who haven't got any. Young Luscombe knows the value of sixpence just as well as I do and a good deal better than she does. He won't drop more than a few thousands at any game, I'll answer for it, and what are a few thousands to him?"

Violet sighed. "Just imagine the bliss of being able to lose several thousand pounds and never miss them! Who wouldn't be a red-haired booby at that price!"

"I hope I know who wouldn't sell herself to a red-haired booby at any price," remarked Mabel in a voice low enough to escape her father's ears, which were a trifle hard of hearing.

Mr. Penrose pushed back his chair and marched off, leaving the two girls to discuss, by no means for the first time, a question upon which there was scant probability of their ever agreeing. It is all very well to talk disdainfully about selling yourself when you are under no temptation to consider humiliating bargains; but suppose you are a homeless and all but incomeless orphan of deplorably expensive tastes, and suppose a young man whose hair may be red and whose manners may be uncouth, yet who has a clear twenty thousand a year of his own, takes it into his thick head to worship the ground you tread upon? Are you to be sneered at and despised for not at once snuffing every spark of hope out of the worshipper? If Violet Ord declined to treat Bob Luscombe with such brutality, it was not because she cherished any illusions respecting the man. She knew a good deal more about him than Mabel did, and was well aware that, however humble he might appear in the capacity of a lover, he was likely to display quite another demeanour as a husband. Nevertheless, the fact remained that he had twenty thousand solid recommendations *per annum* at his back.

He arrived a quarter of an hour before luncheon-time—a powerful, heavily-built youth whose square, underhung jaw and thin lips offered a somewhat puzzling contrast to his watery and projecting eyes. The upper portion of his face and head accounted at

once for the unflattering epithet applied to him by Miss Ord; still there is no reason why a booby should not, upon occasion, be also a bully, and Mr. Luscombe's horses, could they have spoken, might have borne testimony to his being the latter. His mother, whose proud affection for him must surely have been sometimes mingled with wonder as to how on earth she had arrived at being his mother at all, bore no faintest trace of resemblance to him, being a timid, twittering mortal, prematurely old, unfeignedly pious and quite indifferent to the bounteous share of this world's gear allotted to her by Fate. Mr. Penrose, whose neighbourly counsels had been of some assistance to her during the long, anxious years of her Bob's minority, had often declared that she would ruin the lad with her alternating indulgence and fussiness; but Harrow and Cambridge (supplemented, no doubt, by some quality in the nature of their *alumnus* which was averse to anything so uncalled for as ruin) had preserved her from that; and here, for the confutation of pessimists, was the finished product, independent, masterful, capable (in certain directions) and, above all, marriageable.

It is true that Mrs. Luscombe, like Mr. Penrose, was confronted by the great difficulty of discovering a mate worthy of her single chick; but she was extremely anxious that he should marry, because, as everybody knows, the most dreadful things are liable to happen to bachelors of large means. Mabel would have suited her well enough; only Bob, unfortunately, did not fancy Mabel. That he did undisguisedly fancy Violet Ord, a girl with whom his mother was barely

acquainted, and about whose belongings faint echoes of scandal had filtered down from London to remote Devon, was now causing the good lady no slight searchings of heart. She wanted to like Violet, but was not at all sure that she did, and it must be confessed that that easily-bored young woman had been at small pains to cultivate friendly relations with her.

"I say, when are you going to try that mare of mine?" Bob began, striding across to the object of his affections, the moment that he had shaken hands with his host and hostess, and driving her before him into a corner of the room.

This was his customary method of securing her undivided attention, and it was one which, as she often complained, there was no way of defeating, unless you were prepared to drop suddenly on all fours and let him tumble over you. It was, at all events, employed on this occasion with such success that Mrs. Luscombe was able to embark at once upon the tale of her apprehensions respecting the turf without risk of being overheard.

"It isn't the thing itself," she plaintively urged, in reply to Mr. Penrose's bold asseveration that racing is the noblest of all sports; "it's what it may lead to. You can't, I'm sure, find anything to say in favour of betting, and is it not a fact that owners of race-horses always do bet?"

"Not by any means always," answered Mr. Penrose, mentioning several well-known instances to the contrary. "It's a temptation, if you like, but, bless me! you don't suppose you can keep a young fellow of three-and-twenty exempt from temptations, do you?"

Mrs. Luscombe was diffidently of opinion that one ought at least to try; but all the comfort she obtained was an assurance that she might try until she was black in the face without getting any nearer to her end. Mr. Penrose took that opportunity of adding that if he had a son of his own, and if money were no object, he would a good deal rather see him go in for flat-racing than ride in local steeplechases against a lot of underbred competitors, mounted on underbred horses, and doing their level best at every meeting to steal a march upon the stewards.

He was still expatiating upon this theme, which was a rather sore one with him, when Cyril Hadlow's arrival brought about a redistribution in the grouping of the party. The two young men were introduced to one another, and Bob Luscombe, after surveying the new-comer very much as he had been wont of yore to take stock of a new boy at school, remarked:

"Saw you out with the hounds the other day."

The eloquent pause with which he followed up this statement seemed to say as plainly as any words could have done: "And a pretty spectacle you were!" Perhaps, however, he did not mean to be offensive—indeed, it is a question whether he ever meant to be so, although he generally was—for he went on: "Think I knew a brother of yours at Cambridge. First-rate chap; great pal of mine. Just not quite good enough to get his blue for anything, but a nailing good all-round man, nevertheless. He told me about you."

"Then I am sure," observed Cyril, laughing, "he must have told you what an all-round duffer I am. Hubert sorrowfully gave me up as hopeless long ago."

"Oh, I don't know," returned the other, with a fine air of toleration; "he didn't say much about that. You're an artist by trade, ain't you?"

"Well, I was," answered Cyril. "I have been appointed to another trade now, and, as Miss Penrose knows, I haven't shown myself a very promising pupil so far."

The young man with the red hair looked puzzled. "What's that?" he asked. "Pupil of yours, Miss Penrose? What are you teaching him, eh?"

He did not wait for a reply, but pounced once more upon Violet, whom his mother was tentatively catechising, and who had just informed that astonished lady that she really did not know whether she was in favour of the Church Association's enterprises or against them, never having heard of that body before.

"Quite right, Miss Ord," he declared; "don't you be drawn into taking sides. I subscribe to these people because the mater wants me to, and I subscribe to the opposition lot—what do they call 'em? E. C. U., isn't it?—because old Pickering thinks I ought, and old Pickering isn't half a bad chap for a parson; but I'm all for making a ring and letting 'em fight it out to a finish between themselves. I say, that's a ripping tie you've got on! Wish you'd give it to me. I'll let you have an awfully jolly one in exchange."

His courtship was of that direct, undisguised nature. All the world was welcome to know that he admired Miss Ord immensely and that his intentions respecting her were serious. Very likely he thought that from the moment she recognised his intentions as such little further would remain to be achieved, for nobody was

more fully aware of his pecuniary value than he was. He sat beside her at luncheon, and prosecuted the attack with drum and trumpet, not a little to the amusement of Cyril, who wondered whether he was too stupid to understand, or only self-complacent enough to disregard, the occasional vicious snubs which he earned for himself.

Cyril, placed between Mabel and Mrs. Luscombe, had ample leisure to play the part of a looker-on, which was never uncongenial to him; for the former was evidently doing the same, while the latter was engrossed in a subdued colloquy with Mr. Penrose. It seemed to be in accordance with custom that this discussion should have its sequel in Mr. Penrose's study, for thither the old people adjourned, as a matter of course, after luncheon, whereupon Bob immediately challenged Miss Ord to a game of billiards.

"We might all play," Mabel suggested, but the proposal was received with such marked coldness that she forbore to press it.

"Perhaps," she said, turning to Cyril, while the other couple made for the billiard-room, "you would like to come round to the stables with me. There is nothing very magnificent for you to see there; but——"

"But, as I should be none the wiser if there were," remarked Cyril, smiling, "that's unimportant, and the horses, at all events, won't think me intrusive, I daresay."

She laughed and shrugged her shoulders. "Oh, it isn't the fear of spoiling sport that would keep me from

intruding," she candidly avowed; "only sometimes it is better to leave ill alone, don't you think so?"

He felt it to be something of a compliment that she should thus take his comprehension of the whole situation for granted. The main outlines of it could not, of course, have escaped anybody; but he had not been quite certain that it was so completely distasteful to Miss Penrose as she gave him to understand that it was.

"No doubt," he answered, "it is sometimes a good plan to give people plenty of rope."

"That's what I mean. A man like Bob Luscombe can't fail to disgust Violet in the long run, if he isn't interfered with. Because he *is* disgusting, you know."

On the way to the stables, and after a perfunctory inspection of animals whose points he did not venture to criticise, Cyril learned a good deal more about Miss Violet and her suitor. The girl, he was told, was really good at heart; but she had no parents, no money, an atrocious sister, and an alarming appetite for amusement. Was it to be expected that she should turn her back upon twenty thousand a year, even when coupled with a Tony Lumpkin?

"Tony Lumpkin can't be depended upon to supply the sort of amusements that she will want," Cyril shrewdly observed.

"Exactly; but she may make that discovery too late. However, as I say, he is so objectionable that I trust a little to his making himself impossible. Unfortunately, my father, who doesn't dislike him at all—poor father couldn't dislike such a fine horseman if he tried—would think it an excellent match for her."

"Couldn't you manage to lay your hand upon a rival?" asked Cyril.

"I am afraid not," Miss Penrose answered; "rich bachelors don't grow in any profusion hereabouts. I suppose *you* don't see your way to come forward?"

"I would a little rather not, thanks. It seems to me that for a good many months to come I shall have quite enough problems on my hands without adding a love affair to them. Moreover, I am so obsolete that I couldn't possibly marry a woman with whom I was not in love, and I can't fall in love with Miss Ord or anybody else because I am told."

Miss Penrose laughed somewhat more heartily than so simple and creditable a statement seemed to warrant. Did she, perhaps, accept it as an intimation that he was unable to fall in with Mrs. Spencer Hadlow's project? If so, she did not take umbrage.

"Ah, I knew you would prove a broken reed," she remarked. "Well, I am glad you don't attempt to stand up for Bob Luscombe, anyhow. He isn't unpopular; many people get on with him well enough. But he is really odious, and I could see that you thought him so."

Somehow it did not strike Cyril as strange that he should be admitted into Miss Penrose's confidence in this rapid fashion. There are sympathies as well as loves which declare themselves at first sight, and these, naturally, have freer play when the question of love is so palpably excluded from them. The two friends—for a friend each already felt the other to be—had a long talk before they parted about many subjects besides that of Miss Ord's future, which was soon dropped, and if

one of them did not know much about art nor the other much about country life, both were eager for extended information. There sprang up between them a tacit alliance which Mabel almost converted into an avowed one by saying:

"With your tastes and after the life you have led, Kingsmoreton must seem very tame and depressing. Mannington can't pretend to be much better; still it will make a change for you to come over here, so I hope you will look us up as often as you feel inclined."

"Take care," returned the young man; "that might mean every day."

"Well, we shall be delighted to see you on every non-hunting day," she declared, without hesitation, "and hunting is nearly over for this season."

He reflected, on the homeward path, that she certainly would not have given such an invitation if she had not felt as serenely proof against any personal attractions he might possess as he did against those of Miss Violet Ord. But that, of course, was quite as it should be. The very last thing he wished for was that relations so pleasantly initiated should be marred by a suspicion of sentimentality.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MATCHMAKERS.

THE sitting-room assigned to Cyril at Kingsmoreton Court was not only luxuriously furnished—which made no special appeal to him—but was lighted by a jutting bay-window, where (in obedience to Sir Martin's thoughtful orders) had been placed a broad, solid table, admirably adapted to suit an etcher's requirements. Upon this the young man had heaped the paraphernalia belonging to his art, and at it he seated himself on his return from Mannington, having still several hours of daylight before him, and feeling that instinctive desire to utilise them which remained with him as a legacy from years blessed by the insistence of compulsory work.

Blessed, anxious years, the memory of which could not but prompt a very natural sigh! The sale of his productions, it is true, had never been as large or as lucrative as he could have wished; still he had been forced to work by sheer necessity of earning some equivalent. Now that necessity, accompanied by the limitations which had formerly harassed him, was removed, and with its removal came distressing doubts as to whether it was worth while to go on working at all. Many a toiling artist, cramped by contemporary taste or the absence of it, has longed for freedom to please himself, only to find, when emancipated, that this is precisely what freedom cannot enable him to

do. If genius really meant the capacity for taking infinite pains, Cyril Hadlow, as deft, conscientious and scrupulous a craftsman as ever lived, might have turned his new leisure to glorious account; but it is not so. Originality and creative power are gifts which can never be acquired by technical skill, and as for original workers in black and white, they have always been in a very small minority. It was above all as a copyist that Cyril excelled, and imitation, while it may satisfy the heart and mind, by reason of the mechanical dexterity involved, so long as in that way and in no other apparent way are meat and drink procurable, is apt to seem a sorry affair from the moment that it ceases to be obligatory. Better, perhaps, drop the whole thing, try to be a squire, a magistrate, a breeder of cattle, and acquiesce in the humbling fact that art is for one's superiors.

Cyril, with his prepared plate in front of him and the tracing of a sketch, representing Kingsmoreton Court from the south, ready to be transferred to it, had almost arrived at the above reluctant conclusion when a sharp tap at the door was followed, before he had time to respond to it, by the entrance of Mrs. Spencer Hadlow, who wore a neat grey travelling costume, and whose head was enveloped in a white gauze veil.

"Don't you call this friendship?" she asked. "Just delivered at the door by motor, after a twenty-mile burst, and I fly to hold out both hands to you, without even stopping to wash the dirt off!"

She extended two small hands, which were not dusty, and he could do no less than clasp them, saying:

"Well, I needn't tell you how glad I am to see you back. Have you been having a good time?"

"Middling," she answered, sitting down and removing her hat. "Yes, upon the whole, not too bad; though I dropped my money, as usual."

"That's unfortunate. What have you been doing?"

"Oh, playing bridge. If you come to think of it, that's all one ever does worth mentioning when one stays with people in these times. And you?"

"I have been doing nothing even so worthy of mention as playing bridge. When you came in I was just saying to myself that I should never do anything worthy of mention for the rest of my days. One gets rather a blight sometimes."

Her heavy-lidded eyes contemplated him for an instant, while the faintly ironical smile which was seldom wholly absent from her lips grew more pronounced. "Poor thing!" she murmured, with a commiserating intonation which provoked him a little.

"I am not such a poor thing as you suppose," he declared; "I intend to stick to my task and worry through with it, well or badly. I wasn't thinking of that."

"Of this, then?" she asked, pointing to the etching materials on the table. "Well, what is wrong? Won't the inspiration come?"

"This," answered Cyril, "is a picture of a house. The house is a beautiful one; so that the picture, helped out by tracery of trees against the sky and a flight of rooks above them, can't well avoid being beautiful also, after a fashion. But in the case of such productions the question of inspiration doesn't arise."

She nodded. "And you pine for more ambitious productions, I suppose. May I smoke?"

She drew from her pocket a gold case, embellished by a monogram in brilliants, took out a cigarette and proceeded to light it deliberately. "You are an artist," she went on; "you aren't as yet anything else and you don't a bit want to be anything else; still you are so philosophical or unselfish or whatever it may be that you would accept a rather tiresome transformation if you didn't feel that affluence was going to be fatal to you from an artistic point of view. There doesn't seem to be any convincing reason why it should; only you know it will, and you are down on your luck, in consequence."

"That's just it," Cyril confessed, surprised—not for the first time—by the ease and accuracy with which this languid little lady could read his thoughts. "At least, that's why I am down on my luck as you say. But there is a reason—quite a good one—for affluence being fatal to art in the ingrained laziness of human nature, which won't allow us to make painful efforts unless they are indispensable. Not that I am, or ever should have been, an artist."

"Oh, rubbish!"

"Etchers are not artists," the young man gloomily affirmed. "Anyhow, they are not creative artists. I suppose they might be; but they never are. For want of a pallet, perhaps."

"Then why not buy a pallet and a supply of paint? The cost wouldn't be prohibitive, would it?"

In a few rapid sentences he related the story of his great disappointment. The subject was one to

which he seldom alluded, but the suggested sympathy of his present companion gave him encouragement, despite the amused smile with which she surveyed him through a drifting veil of cigarette smoke, and despite the prejudice that he entertained against feminine use of tobacco. She was friendly, he thought, and she understood.

She understood so well that her rejoinder, when she made it, was both sensible and apposite.

"It was awfully rough upon you to discover that you were colour-blind; that was a real misfortune, and there wasn't any remedy for it. But what has happened to you since has been sheer and clear good luck; though nobody knows better than I do that it spells boredom and depression just now."

"You are perfectly right," Cyril admitted, "and I am a thankless dog. The truth, no doubt, is that I hadn't a future, and——"

"Well, I don't know about that," she interrupted; "but you have got one now, so cheer up. I have had my little disappointments too, I can tell you; but I don't allow my mind to dwell upon them, because I want to stave off physical decay as long as possible. I haven't a solitary grey hair yet, and I'll tell you my age if you like. I struck thirty-five two months ago. Do I look more?"

She did not look nearly as much, he was honestly able to assure her, and she made him laugh by the further admission that her frankness was chiefly due to a conviction that somebody would soon inform him, if indeed somebody had not already informed him, that she was forty.

"You see," she explained, "I am not quite as universally beloved in these parts as I deserve to be, and when people want to say something nasty about a woman they naturally traduce her on the score of age. I don't mean Constantia, who, cordially as she detests me, always speaks the truth; but there are plenty of others who aren't troubled with her scruples."

Then, paying back confidence with confidence, she confirmed some of the surmises that he had formed respecting her from of the outset. Her childlessness, it seemed, had been her main offence—an offence which Sir Martin had outwardly, though never inwardly, pardoned, while Lady Constantia had done neither the one nor the other.

"But apart from that," she owned, "I have erred and strayed in ways which they couldn't be expected to overlook. They were not devoted to my husband; he was hardly the sort of person to inspire devotion. Still he wasn't difficult to get on with, and they naturally thought that I might have got on with him."

She paused for a moment, as if to invite a question; but silence seemed so much more appropriate that Cyril said nothing, and she resumed, in her leisurely way:

"No; Spencer and I didn't hit it off. The one thing in the world that he really cared about was politics, which don't appeal to me the least little bit, and he only cared for them in a Parliamentary sense—as leading up to the Treasury bench, I mean. By the way, I trust you are not a politician."

"I hold some rather strong political views," Cyril confessed. "Radical, not to say Socialistic ones, to tell the truth."

"Ah, that's different; that might be amusing, or even interesting. Provided that one's views aren't practical, one doesn't run the same risk of being deadly wearisome. Well, Spencer and I never quarrelled; but —in short we went our respective ways. Then he caught a bad cold, poor man, and before one realised that it threatened to be serious, all was over. Circumstances being what they were, his death was a blow to the old people; but I don't suppose anybody shed tears over him in his personal capacity—least of all your humble servant. I hope I don't shock you?"

"I don't think honesty is ever shocking," Cyril said.

"That's so nice of you! The doctrine might lead you rather far, though."

She lighted another cigarette, yawned, stretched herself out, and then—"What made me begin about all this?" she asked. "Oh yes; I wanted to bring the conviction home to you that I am not such a bad sort, after all. It's rather good of me, for instance, to stay here and be bored to death; it's rather good of me— don't you think so?—to like you. Because you *are* a little bit of an interloper, you know."

"Very much of one, and I'm as grateful to you as I ought to be for liking me. At the same time, I can't exactly be said to have cut you out, can I?"

"No; only you're the outward and visible sign of the fact that I am cut out. That's what makes it so creditable to me to have taken a fancy to you."

Some sudden notion appeared to tickle her; for she broke into a gurgle of low laughter which lasted so long that he had to inquire what the joke was.

"I was only thinking," she replied, "that if I had been ten years younger, and if some other little matters of detail could be arranged, you might repair the injustice of fortune by marrying me. But I daresay you won't suspect me of wanting you to do that."

"I am sure you don't," Cyril declared.

"Why so positive? You are a distinct prize, remember, and I am shockingly hard up, and thirty-five is no age, and, if you'll believe me, I am still considered quite attractive. However, my intentions are strictly honourable. Oh, that reminds me of Mabel Penrose. Have you seen her?—and fallen in love with her?"

"I saw her only an hour or two ago at Mannington, where I was invited to lunch," Cyril answered. "No; I haven't fallen in love with her."

"That's a pity. What did you think of her?"

Cyril considered for a moment. "Well," he replied, "I think Miss Penrose is a perfect specimen of the traditional English young lady."

"Faint praise; but perhaps her style of beauty is rather too rustic for your taste. I grant you that she's rustic. Likewise a trifle ordinary and rather more than a trifle pig-headed. But that you wouldn't discover at first."

"Good heavens, no! I can't imagine making such discoveries as that about Miss Penrose, first or last."

Adela flung the end of her cigarette out of the open

window and laughed again. "You are falling in love with her," said she, and patted the young man on the shoulder. "I thought you would, and I congratulate you. You can't do better."

Cyril refrained from repudiating a charge which would not have been at all disagreeable, had it been true. He even wished it true, seeing that matrimony was his clearly unavoidable destiny, and he was not without a sense of gratitude to Mrs. Spencer Hadlow, who—nothing if not good-natured—desired to promote a match so expedient from many points of view.

Now, it so happened that at the same moment the other party to the suggested match was listening (not very patiently or attentively, it is true; still she was listening, because she had no alternative) to voluble representations of its expediency.

"Simply made to order!" Violet Ord declared; "he'll fit you like a glove. Handsome, nice-mannered, docile and, I should think by the look of him, religious. At all events, if he isn't, he can easily be made so. And there will be no question of forsaking Uncle Jim either, because it will be the most natural arrangement in the world for you to live here after your marriage until old Sir Martin dies. Then the two properties will be joined, and your husband will get a peerage if he wants one. He can't ride—so our friend the booby tells me—but that doesn't matter, as he seems to be anxious to learn. You will have to instruct him in horsemanship while the booby is giving me lessons, which he says he means to do, and———"

"Yes, but you won't put me off by talking that sort of rubbish, or any other sort of rubbish," interrupted

Miss Penrose composedly; "so you needn't try. Vi, why do you allow the booby, as you call him, to treat you as if you were his property already?"

The two girls were walking, with linked arms, across the park towards Mannington, having just parted from young Luscombe, who had been accompanied as far as the entrance-gates by one of them and resolutely intercepted there by the other.

"There is no known way of preventing men of that kind from behaving as they choose, except directly insulting them," Violet answered.

"Why not give that way a trial, then? Not that refusing to walk home with him when you were told would have been a direct insult."

Violet jerked up her shoulders. "Do you suppose I wasn't overjoyed to see you barring the way and waving your umbrella like a flaming sword? Was it my fault that his mamma drove off in the carriage long before he had done showing me how to screw back into the middle pocket and taking that opportunity to squeeze my hands in his huge red paws?"

"Yes," answered her cousin, "I should think it was."

"Then all I can say is you don't know much about stubborn Robert. It had to be an insult or nothing; and if you drive me into a corner, as I see you are bent upon doing, I don't know that I can quite afford to insult twenty thousand a year."

Upon occasion, Violet Ord could be quite as stubborn as Bob Luscombe or anybody else, and at that moment her pretty, childish face had a look upon it which made her sagacious cousin pause. The latter walked on for nearly a hundred yards before remarking:

"I would rather die than marry such a man myself, however rich he might be."

The other pulled her arm away and frowned. "Well then, I wouldn't!" she retorted. "I should hate to die."

"And wouldn't you hate to be Mrs. Bob Luscombe?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I should hate *him*, of course, but there would be compensations—lots of them. Ida hates her husband; but nobody can pretend that Ida isn't happy in her way."

"Oh, if you can look forward to being happy in Ida's way——!"

Violet stood still and stamped. "It's easy for you to be good, Mabel!" she exclaimed. "What temptation have you to be anything else?—and who wouldn't be good for choice? I am not wicked: I don't want to be. Ida makes me sick and sore all over with her wickedness, and the last thing I am ever likely to do, I should hope, is to imitate her. But what is to become of me? I am in a cleft stick."

The girl's eyes were full of tears, and her companion's, which had assumed a somewhat austere and accusing expression, softened at once. "Oh yes; I know," she murmured.

"Don't talk as if you didn't, then. I can't go on for ever being a burden upon other people; there are times when Pont Street is made a hell upon earth to me, and as for Mannington—well, I'm not proud, and I'm not ungrateful, but——"

"Mannington is rather slow, perhaps?"

Violet laughed through her tears. "I didn't say

so; but I won't contradict you. Let us call Mannington slow. As a matter of fact, it is. Call me fast if you like—though I'm not. What I may turn into if I don't make haste to establish myself is another question."

"But Bob Luscombe is not the only rich man in England, if it comes to that," Mabel objected. "There is this young Hadlow, for instance, who will be very well off some day."

"Thanks awfully, but I don't covet my neighbour's ass, nor anything that is hers. Except, of course, her good heart and her clear conscience."

"He really isn't an ass, Vi."

"Perhaps not; but he is yours, or going to be. If he took his eyes off you once, it wasn't to respond to my inviting glances, I can tell you."

And during the remainder of the walk Miss Ord declined to be drawn away from a subject which had the double merit of amusing her and affording her shelter.

"Oh yes," she exclaimed impatiently at length, in reply to a plain question; "I daresay I shall end by accepting him. I don't mean to begin by doing it, if that's any comfort to you; but I don't mean to lose him. There! now you know as much as I do, and I couldn't lay my soul more bare if I were in the confessional. Let us have tea and talk about something less repulsive."

CHAPTER VII.

NO INTENTIONS.

"THE more I see of Cyril the better I like him," said Sir Martin. "I make no extravagant claims on his behalf; but at least it must be admitted, I think, that he is doing his very best to fit himself for a life which can't be altogether congenial to him."

Mr. Pickering nodded assent. "Yes, he is doing his best; he is a good fellow."

"And considering how easily he might have been a bad fellow," Sir Martin pursued, "considering what a large proportion of young fellows are bad in one way or another, one can't but be grateful to him for not being the dozen or so of things that he isn't."

Mr. Pickering laughed. "Well, he has no conspicuous vices; still you had better not expect him to be entirely negative. There are subjects, religious and political, upon which he strikes me as a trifle too positive. He'll outgrow all that in time, though."

"So far as I can gather," remarked Lady Constantia in her usual detached and uninterested way, "he is a Socialist and an Atheist."

The three were seated round the card-table at which they had been playing a rubber of whist after dinner, Adela, who had been the Rector's partner, having retired "to write letters." In other words, she had gone upstairs to smoke, as they all knew, though they never accorded that practice the tacit sanction of a

verbal allusion. The Rector was not so ill-advised as to undertake his young friend's defence. To doubt the literal accuracy of Old Testament narratives is a very different thing from being an Atheist, while Socialism has become a somewhat elastic term; but Lady Constantia probably meant nothing more than that she did not agree with her husband in liking Cyril and that the curate had been telling her tales. It seemed best, therefore, to ignore the interpolation and merely repeat, "He'll outgrow all that."

"I am glad," Sir Martin meditatively resumed, "that they have taken him up at Mannington. He is dining there to-night, you know."

"I ought to know it, as this is the third time that you have mentioned the circumstance," answered the Rector, laughing. "Well, I heartily approve, if that's what you want me to say. I don't see how you could have made a wiser choice for him."

"I don't presume to choose for him," Sir Martin protested; "I haven't breathed a word upon the subject to him or Penrose or anybody. But it looks as if there might be some chance of his choosing for himself in a way that would please us all."

Lady Constantia became suddenly alert. "Mabel?" she asked. "Is it possible that Mabel would accept him?"

"Within the bounds of possibility, I should think," replied Sir Martin, smiling; "but of course, I know nothing about it. I hope she may, that's all."

"Oh, so do I!" Lady Constantia exclaimed, with unwonted fervour. And presently she added, "If he

marries, he must necessarily be given a separate establishment."

"Well, yes," her husband assented; "his marriage will have that drawback, no doubt."

"But you can afford it."

"Oh, I can afford whatever may be needed for house rent and so forth. What I was thinking of was the loss of his company."

Lady Constantia rose, and walked quickly round the table. "Martin," said she, in a pained voice, "you can't have become so fond as that of a total stranger in this short time!"

"I really believe I should miss him," Sir Martin owned, scanning her troubled face; "I plead guilty to having become rather fond of him. I wish you had!"

"Be sure," she returned, with great emphasis and earnestness, "that I shall never do that! How can I take fancies to strangers? I am too old; we are both too old, and—and not so happy as we once were. Why should we wish for anything more than to be allowed to end our days in peace? Surely that is not much to ask!"

Rarely indeed was she moved to exhibit such emotion before a third person, but perhaps Mr. Pickering's presence did not embarrass her, for if anybody was acquainted with the secrets of her heart, he was. Sir Martin, oddly enough, was not, and to the Rector there was something infinitely pathetic in the spectacle of the two wistful old faces, exchanging glances which were fated to miss their mark. He fulfilled the only useful function of third persons by hastening to relieve tension.

"We are getting ahead of events," he briskly reminded his hearers; "we haven't caught our hare yet. As for peace, I fear it isn't to be had at any price on this side of the grave. I have been seeking peace and ensuing it ever since I took charge of this benefice, but what with curates and dissenters and poachers and drunkards, not to mention total abstainers, it always contrives to elude me. Now what I should like to be told is this: when I know for a fact that a certain parishioner of mine is in the habit of snaring game belonging to a person who shall be nameless, am I bound to give information or am I not?"

Sir Martin fell at once into the trap so benevolently laid for him. "My dear Pickering, I don't want to hear anything about it. But if he is caught red-handed I shall have to take action, and you had better invite him to consider very seriously what that means. Because it will be neither his first nor his second offence, mind."

Thus a harmless discussion as to the responsibility devolving upon those who compound a felony was started, and the potential loves of Cyril Hadlow and Mabel Penrose were left to take care of themselves.

Guided by Providence or Destiny, or whatever the force may be that sets such delicate machinery in motion, they were really taking pretty good care of themselves just then. So, at all events, an observer of the young people, seated side by side on a sofa at the far end of the Mannington drawing-room and conversing with apparent absorption, might have been justified in thinking, and so Mr. Penrose, nodding

drowsily behind the *Field,* which he had picked up, did think. Mr. Penrose was resignedly acquiescent. Being a sensible old gentleman, he was aware that certain developments are as inevitable in every human existence as is the slow process of growth, maturity and decay in every human body. Fathers possess, no doubt, a right of veto; but this can only be exercised in extreme cases, and there was nothing against young Hadlow; on the contrary, there were many things to be urged in his favour. As for his more shadowy avuncular right of veto, Mr. Penrose had so little inclination to brandish that feeble weapon that he had only chuckled when his niece and Bob Luscombe had betaken themselves to the billiard-room a quarter of an hour before. Luscombe was all right. No harm in Luscombe, except a taste for low company, of which marriage would very soon cure him. Devilish ugly chap, if you like; but that was Violet's affair. Moreover, it is all humbug to say that an income of twenty thousand ought to make no difference to a girl who has neither home nor fortune of her own. Of course it makes a difference. Mr. Penrose had not scrupled to enunciate the above opinion to sundry neighbours and cronies of his who had been partaking of his hospitality; for there had been a dinner-party at Mannington that evening, and although everybody else had departed at the orthodox hour of half-past ten, these two young men still lingered—having, it must be supposed, received some intimation that they were at liberty to do so.

"Oh, she asked him to play," Mabel was saying to her neighbour; "that's Violet all over. After taking

no notice of him the whole evening and reducing him to the most satisfactory state of sulks and humility, she must needs undo all her work at the last moment!"

"Perhaps she thought she had gone a little too far," Cyril suggested.

"Not a doubt of it, and naturally he understood why she wanted to make amends. I despair of her when she does such things!"

"She seems to do them with her eyes open, anyhow."

"It's just because her eyes are so wide open that I despair of her. I hoped he would disgust her, and he has; but she invites him to play billiards with her all the same, you see."

"It goes against a woman's instincts," Cyril observed, with much originality and profundity, "to turn her back upon an admirer, whether he disgusts her or not. We men are differently constituted. When a lady whom we don't happen to admire makes advances to us, our first impulse is to fly like the wind."

"Do ladies make advances to men who don't admire them?" Mabel asked.

He surprised her a little by replying unhesitatingly that such was their frequent practice; nor did he deny, when interrogated, that his assertion was based upon personal experience. He was evidently not proud of his involuntary conquests; perhaps he thought (as a fact, he did) that there was nothing out of the ordinary in them; perhaps he was honestly unaware of his striking physical advantages. But his neighbour, who could not and did not ignore the fact that he was quite

the handsomest man she had ever beheld, pictured him to herself as beset, during his Continental wanderings, by charmers of the Latin races, and although she was far from entertaining any wish to compete with them, the vision, for some reason or other, was not wholly pleasing to her. Also his generalisations appeared to her to be over-hasty, and for the honour of her sex, she said:

"Ah, but you are not speaking of nice women."

"Am I not?" he returned. "Well, no; I suppose not. But the nice ones, after all, are a select minority."

"Like the nice men."

"Oh yes, like the nice men. All I meant to say was that in the matter of love, or what goes by that name, our standpoint is not the same as yours. The mere circumstance that a man is enamoured of you gives you a sort of bias in his favour, whether you like him or dislike him. With us it is just the other way about; our sensations in a similar case are a mixture of wrath and alarm."

Well, that was another generalisation which might not be entirely warranted; but as an index to the speaker's own mental attitude it possessed some interest and piquancy. Mabel, however, did him the justice to acquit him of having purposely sounded a warning note, and was only curious to ascertain whether he agreed with her very strongly held opinion that it is a thousand times better to remain single than to marry without love. It appeared that he did, as regarded himself, but that he was not quite so certain about other people.

"Marriages of convenience, which are the rule in France, don't result half as badly as French novelists make out. Husbands and wives expect less of one another there than they do in this country, and, generally speaking, I think they get more."

"I can understand that the husbands may get as much as they have bargained for; but what about the wives?"

"They seem to be contented. They haven't any illusions to lose; and I suppose, on an average view of human nature, they are just as likely to find that they have drawn prizes as blanks. You see, Miss Penrose, the unpleasant truth is that love, like everything else in the world, is transient."

"Do you know," returned the girl, smiling, "that your saying that is conclusive proof that you yourself have never been in love."

He smiled back at her in unfeigned amusement. He was twenty-eight years of age and had been in and out of love ever so many times. At that particular moment, though, he did not happen to be in love with anybody; so he felt that he was well equipped for a sane and dispassionate examination of the theme.

"You may be right," he had the magnanimity to concede; "only if you are, all the erotic poets must be wrong."

"Even Dante and Petrarch?"

"You can hardly class them among the erotics. Besides, both Beatrice and Laura were abstractions. What, after all, does falling in love mean? Shouldn't we have to confess, if we were honest, that illusion is

the very essence of it? We begin by being physically attracted to a given person; we proceed to endow her with a hundred imaginary attributes; then we either marry her, or get to know her so well that we find she doesn't possess them, and then—well, then comes the end."

"As if one couldn't forgive, or as if one demanded perfection! You aren't talking about love at all, you are talking about fancy. The real thing outlasts what you call physical attraction, and old age, and quarrels, and everything else which, according to you, ought to knock it on the head. You needn't look any farther than Kingsmoreton for an example."

"Do you ask me to believe that Sir Martin and Lady Constantia are in love with one another?"

"Why not? One can't tell how people feel at that age, but I should think there might be a sort of loyalty to the past which would amount to it. Anyhow, they care more for one another than they do for anybody else alive."

"Mutual affection and esteem are precisely the results that may be looked for from a marriage of convenience."

The discussion—a somewhat artificial one, inasmuch as neither of the disputants was so eager for a dialectic victory as for increased light upon the other's general character—was kept up until the billiard players, looking rather flushed and cross, returned to interrupt it. In their case, evidently, the course of love had not been running smooth, and Mr. Luscombe's exit was both ungracious and ungraceful.

"Well, I'm off," he curtly announced. "Good night, everybody."

He shook hands with his host and hostess, nodded to Cyril and stalked away, without so much as glancing at Miss Ord, who made a face at his retreating back.

"Charming, high-bred creature, isn't he?" said she, after he had banged the door behind him.

"He is always like that when he is at his worst," Mabel remarked, with some complacency.

"Indeed he isn't!" returned her cousin. "If you want to see him at his worst you must be alone with him, and he must just have swallowed one whisky-and-soda too many."

Mr. Penrose bristled up like an old watch-dog. "Eh, what's that you say?"

He was prepared to stand a good deal rather than fall out with a neighbour whom he believed to be a decent enough youth in the main, if somewhat unpolished; but he was not the man to let his niece be insulted under his roof.

"Oh, nothing," answered Violet fretfully, as she threw herself down on a sofa. "He isn't a gentleman, that's all, but then nobody ever thought he was, so it doesn't signify."

She was evidently a good deal perturbed, and looked as if so little would be needed to reduce her to tears that Cyril hastened to take his leave. While he was driving homewards under a starry sky, he devoted a few minutes to being sorry for the poor girl, and then dismissed her from his mind, as he found it pleasanter to dwell upon thoughts of one who was im-

measurably her superior. Yes, he told himself, Mabel Penrose was well-born British maidenhood raised to its highest expression. Fresh, spontaneous, clean in heart and speech, liking the things that girls in her station do well to like, free from any taint of the terrible, sinister vulgarity which has of late years invaded every class of English society. Pretty, too, with a beauty which grew steadily upon you, though it did not startle you. It would be easy to fall in love with her. Or rather it would be easy and pleasant to make love to her, given a disposition on both sides towards acquiescence in benevolent schemes and in the promise of a smiling, placid future. Since, however, that proviso was palpably wanting, there was no more to be said about it, save that friendship remained.

Something to the above effect was the gist of his reply to Mrs. Spencer, who met him at the top of the staircase on his return to Kingsmoreton, accompanied him to his sitting-room and demanded categorical information.

"Well, that's all right; that's as right as possible," was her verdict, after he had concluded his narrative, which she had punctuated with a succession of little nods. "Didn't I tell you all along that you would fall a victim to Mabel?"

"But I thought I had just told you that that is exactly what I haven't done."

Adela laughed. "Oh, that's what you thought you were telling me; but what would be the use of having eyes and ears if one had to accept everything that reached them literally? Would you like to know what is going to happen? You will take your time, both of

you; you won't be in any hot haste; but the crisis ought to be reached by June or July next, and the wedding, I should think, might be fixed for November or thereabouts. At that rate, I might order a pink frock for it—pink being my colour. I daresay you haven't noticed that I am still in half mourning."

She waved away his disclaimers and yawned. "Now I'm going to bed," said she. "Oh, what an evening we did have!—the Rector and solemn whist, and the usual black looks for you know whom. Well, it's the last for a good long time to come, praise Heaven!"

"The last?" echoed Cyril in dismay. "Are you deserting us, then?"

"By to-morrow morning's express. Do you know that I have been here for more than two months? Two blessed months out of one's brief existence, and nothing to show for them, except a much-needed tip from the dear old man and the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

"Do you call that last boon nothing?" Cyril inquired, laughing.

"One hardly knows yet. With cultivation, it may grow up into something; only married and engaged men are always rather hard to cultivate. You must let me see a little more of you before you surrender your liberty."

"How can I if my betrothal is to take place early in the summer?"

"By coming up to London, of course. It's in the compact that you are to be allowed an occasional holiday, isn't it?"

"Yes, I am to please myself about that; and indeed

I ought to pay my mother and sisters a visit every now and then. My mother, by the way, is full of curiosity about you. She says my letters give her the impression that you are by far the most original and interesting person in this house."

"Does she? *Quel flair!*"

But it seemed that Mrs. Spencer felt no corresponding curiosity about Cyril's mother; for she did not offer to call upon that lady, as she might have done. She scribbled an address in Sloane Gardens upon a scrap of paper and tossed it to him, saying:

"There!—that's my humble dwelling; mind you look me up. Meanwhile, I have a parting word of counsel to you. Mabel is a girl in a thousand, and she has almost all the virtues and charms that there are; only she isn't what you could call exceptionally quick at seeing a joke. It's necessary to be serious with her: otherwise she'll begin to distrust you, which will be apt to bring the whole Spanish castle down with a run. Good night."

That criticism, Cyril thought, was not unlikely to be just. He had himself noticed that Miss Penrose resembled the majority of good women in disliking irony, and of course it may prove a trifle irksome to spend your life with a person so constituted. However, as he did not contemplate spending his life with Mabel, the caution had no special significance for him.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. RIGBY'S DISCIPLE.

"YOU *have* quarrelled with him, then? What a blessing!"

Such was Mabel Penrose's comment upon her cousin's proclaimed intention of leaving for London forthwith, which was made known to her in her bedroom shortly after Bob Luscombe had taken himself off in deep dudgeon.

Violet heaved a sigh. "It is some consolation," she remarked, "to think that if my arrival is always a bore to Ida, my departure is a blessing to you."

"You know so well how untrue that is," returned the other, "that I am not going to give myself the trouble of contradicting you. Did he behave very outrageously?"

"Oh," answered Violet, with a grimace, "one has been chased round billiard-tables before now. He behaved as men of his sort always do when they have had a little too much to drink. He is repenting already, and to-morrow afternoon he will certainly come over to lick the ground and implore forgiveness. That's why he won't find me here."

"Because you don't mean to forgive him, I hope."

"No; only because I don't want to be obliged to do it so soon. It's just possible—of course it isn't likely, still it's possible—that I may never be obliged to forgive him at all. There's the whole London season

ahead, and with luck I may pick up one of the rich crumbs that Ida brushes off her table when she sees her way to devouring a richer one."

"With luck," said Mabel, "you may meet some man whom you will really care for, and then it won't matter whether he is rich or poor."

But Violet, who was out of temper, did not take this suggestion in good part.

"That's such rot!" she returned. "Of course the one and only thing I insist upon is that my future husband shall be at least moderately rich. If he has an amiable disposition and isn't downright repulsive to look at, so much the better; but details are details. What's the use of being a hypocrite?"

"I am not a hypocrite," Mabel protested.

"Oh, *you*—no! You're everything that you ought to be and can't help being. You come straight out of a fairy tale or a story by Miss Charlotte Yonge. You dwell serenely within the ring-fence of the property which will be yours some day; you visit the poor, you go to church, you have all the amusements that a really nice-minded young woman ought to wish for, and in due season you bestow your maidenly affections upon a Mr. Cyril Hadlow, who is respectable, good-looking and well-to-do. No wonder you advise the rest of us to go and do likewise! That isn't hypocrisy, it's only—what shall we call it?—a very natural and becoming objection to look ugly facts in the face."

It was not very easy to reproach Violet at any time, and it was always vain to reason with her. She had a conscience of a sort and pride of a sort and refined instincts, with regard to which it could only be hoped

that they would assert themselves at the right moment; but to drive her demanded a firm, light hand, together with qualifications which were denied by circumstances to her cousin.

Mabel quite realised that her own exceptionally fortunate lot gave her an air of insincerity when she attempted to preach sound doctrine; so she held her peace, although it was not the case that she shrank from facing such ugly facts as that Ida Tilehurst had not a shred of character left or that the dowerless Violet could hardly grant herself the luxury of being squeamish.

Nor was there any truth in the assertion that she had lost, or was going to lose, her heart to young Hadlow. Imagine losing one's heart to a man who regarded love as a transient insanity and marriage as depending for its success upon a basis of mutual toleration! But just as Cyril had said to himself that it would be easy to fall a little in love with her, so she found that, although he might not be lovable, it was impossible to help liking him. She saw him frequently, almost daily, after her cousin had left her and after he had been deprived of Adela's always diverting companionship; once or twice Sir Martin brought him out hunting again; more than once or twice he availed himself of some pretext to ride or walk over to tea. Rapidly, insensibly their intimacy developed; each gladly recognised that there was no misprision of that intimacy on the other's part, and it hardly needs to be added that they would have been playing a rather dangerous game if any danger could

be said to attach to a state of things so inherently desirable.

"Don't you think it is rather odd that we should hit it off so well," Cyril asked, one day, at the close of a protracted conversation, "seeing that we differ upon almost every subject under the sun?"

"We agree upon one point," she answered; "we always want to get at the truth if we can, and we aren't above taking a lesson about things of which we happen to be ignorant."

He nodded and laughed. "Oh yes; we teach one another things. That is, you teach me things. Thanks to you, I now know much more than I did about the art of venery; I have even arrived at a glimmering of sympathy with your dignified, picturesque Tory traditions, though I can't feel that there is any place for them in the twentieth century. But what have you learnt from me, I wonder, except that etchings are not produced with a burin?"

She had really learnt a good deal, her horizon having been permanently enlarged by what she had heard from him respecting the standpoint of Continental pioneers, and she was quite correct in stating that the main bond of union between them was a common love of truth. After all, one may be a theoretical Republican, or even a theoretical freethinker, without forfeiting the goodwill of the orthodox, so long as one refrains from translating one's theories into practice.

Yet, sooner or later, the time is sure to come when a man, be he never so broad-minded, must needs avow himself a partisan, and to Cyril this time came when

the Easter recess brought Colonel Bampfylde, the Conservative member for the Kingsmoreton division, down on a visit to Mannington for the purpose of addressing his constituents. The Colonel, a middle-aged, much respected landowner from the other side of the county, represented Unionism, and in that capacity enjoyed the support of Sir Martin Hadlow, whose late son he had succeeded; but the Unionist party was at that time beginning to be rent by internal dissensions; a general election was thought to be imminent, and the issues before the country were so involved that there was no longer any depending upon votes which had until recently been considered safe.

"Between you and me," Colonel Bampfylde confided to Miss Penrose on the evening of his arrival, "I hardly know what to talk about to these fellows. I know what I'd rather not talk about, because everything that our side has done of late is so open to misconstruction, and generally speaking, one can find safety by confining oneself to matters of local interest. But this time, as bad luck will have it, they have got a grievance about that land of Hadlow's which he won't sell, and I can't oppose Hadlow. They want to develop the place, you know, make it a seaside resort, build a pier and a pavilion and so forth."

"And ruin it."

"Well, I suppose their ideas of ruin may not be the same as ours. Anyhow, Hadlow stands on his rights and says he'll see them farther first."

"And aren't you with him?"

"On æsthetic grounds I am; I should be sorry to see Kingsmoreton transformed into a west-country

Margate. But the butcher and the baker and the grocer would not be sorry at all. Like the rest of us, they are anxious to increase their incomes, and in these days it is dangerous for landlords to be obstructive."

"Can Parliament prevent them from being obstructive?"

"Not in cases of this kind; but Mr. Rigby is of opinion that Parliament ought to have that power, and electors can refuse to vote for a candidate who thinks otherwise."

"Mr. Rigby ought to be ashamed of coming and stirring up strife in a constituency with which he has nothing to do."

Tall, lean Colonel Bampfylde twisted his grey moustache and laughed. "I quite agree with you, my dear young lady. Unfortunately, that is just the sort of proceeding in which these agitators delight; so here he is, and if my meetings pass off without a row, I am sure it will not be his fault."

It was perhaps no fault of Mr. Rigby's, a prominent and eloquent representative of Labour in the House of Commons, that he had been invited to pay a flying visit to Kingsmoreton while prosecuting an Easter campaign amongst neighbouring towns of greater importance; but it was certainly a misfortune both for Colonel Bampfylde and for Sir Martin Hadlow that he had responded to the call. For nobody understood better than he how to inflame the slow passions of a stolid audience, nor could anybody be more honestly convinced than he was that landlords are a selfish and tyrannical class. For the rest, a very

decent man, with a gift of fluent oratory, shaggy, iron-grey hair, an unkempt beard and a twinkle in his eye. Kingsmoreton, already more or less vaguely dissatisfied with its lot for several reasons, some of which were not bad ones, was certain to be fascinated by his plausible fallacies. So, at least, Colonel Bampfylde predicted, and on the following morning Miss Penrose obtained unwelcome proof that one person who, though not an elector, must be accounted influential, had become an ardent disciple of Mr. Rigby's as the result of having heard that gentleman speak.

This was Cyril, whom she found busily engaged on an admirable pen-and-ink sketch of Jacob Beer's head, and whose animated conversation with his sitter was not interrupted by her approach, which indeed neither of them observed. They had established themselves in the sunshine outside Jacob's cottage, whither Mabel, after having driven Colonel Bampfylde into the town, had strolled up for a quarter of an hour's chat with an old friend.

"Now I bain't contradictin' of 'ee, mind," her old friend was saying; "I d'know but what Rigbee med be right if yu and me and 'im was makin' a fresh start in outlandish parts. But this 'ere country's old England, d' yu see, sir, and avore yu turns England upside down yu 'm got t' convart a powerful lot o' volk, I rackon."

"Just what we are trying to do, Jacob," the artist returned. "Don't look at me, please; look towards your left shoulder—that's right! We are doing our best to convert you, and we shall undoubtedly succeed

sooner or later, because it is your battle that we are fighting. You have only a foggy idea that some abstraction which you call by the name of God made the world as it is, and that you will get into trouble if you improve it."

"This 'ere world," retorted Jacob doggedly, "wur created in zeven days by th' Almighty fur th' use o' man, and cursed thru' th' disobadience o' th' zame, 'cordin to Scriptur'. That I 'olds tu, 'straction or no 'straction."

"Very well; it was created for the use of mankind, not for the profit or pleasure of a handful of men. What was meant for all has been seized and is held by a very small minority. A great French writer expressed the truth in as few words as possible when he said 'Property is Theft.'"

"The pop'lation o' th' British Isles, if th' almanack bain't wrong," remarked Mr. Beer, "is vorty-tu million in round numbers—zay twenty million males—an' acr'age a matter o' seventy-eight million, with mebbe tu thirds perductive. Did Johnny Crappo think as there didn' owt to be a landlord amongst th' lot?"

"He thought that the land ought to belong to them all."

"Makin' of 'em propri'tors and consekently thaves. Twenty million starvin' thaves!—'cos tu an' a 'alf acres bain't gwine to save no man from starvin', mind, and 'twouldn' work out to much more'n that by my calc'lation."

"You don't see the point," Cyril began.

"Nor anybody else either," struck in Mabel from the background. "Mr. Hadlow knows just as well as

you do, Jacob, that he is talking nonsense. He is only trying to excite you, so that he may throw a little more fire into his portrait, which is splendid, with the fire or without it."

She bent over the artist's shoulder, upon which she laid her hand to prevent him from rising, while Jacob protested, "Lor' love 'ee, ma dear, there bain't no vire tu be struck out o' me by such vulishness!"

But Cyril would not admit that he had been talking nonsense at all. He was himself much more excited than his model; he began at once to say what a splendid fellow Rigby was, with what satisfaction he had listened to a man who knew his own mind and was not afraid to speak it, concluding with a strong expression of opinion that in the particular question at issue Sir Martin had not a leg to stand upon. "There never was a clearer case of legality being at variance with justice and equity," he declared.

Mabel did not take him over seriously. "So you would like to disfigure poor Kingsmoreton for ever— you who call yourself an artist!" she exclaimed.

"What I should like has nothing to do with the matter," he returned. "If the wishes of the inhabitants could be dismissed from consideration, I should like to pull down every building that has been erected here within the last thirty years. But you can't disregard the wishes of the inhabitants; neither they nor their dwellings exist for the sole purpose of being picturesque."

"Perhaps," observed Mabel more gravely, "we don't any of us know for certain what the purpose of our existence is. Most of us believe, though, that we

are what we are and where we are by the will of the Higher Power which you called just now—but I don't think you quite meant what you said—an abstraction."

Now, this was approaching somewhat perilous ground with a young lady who had never had the shadow of a religious doubt in her life, and Cyril, well aware that it behoved him to walk circumspectly, was minded to hold his peace, as he had done hitherto on similar occasions. Still he could not resist pointing out that dumb and blind submission to the actual was a poor compliment to a Creator who was supposed to have endowed His creatures with reasoning faculties for their guidance. The result was that the conversation became somewhat heated, and that in the course of it he was led into saying certain things which visibly distressed his hearer. The appearance of the Rector, accompanied by his curate Mr. Sandford, was not unwelcome to the disputants and was hailed with a loud sigh of relief by Jacob Beer, weary alike of a constrained attitude and of unprofitable controversy.

"'Tis a girt honour my old 'ead and zhoulders be gettin' this marnin'," he remarked, for the benefit of the new-comers, "but they 'm made tu zuffer fur 't somethin' crool, I tell 'ee! Wuss nor any photergrafmen is these itchin' artisses, let alone their politics, which they larns straight from Old Nick, savin' yer Rev'rence's presence."

"Meaning Mr. Rigby?" inquired the Rector. "I rather like Mr. Rigby's politics myself; they have the advantage of lying altogether outside the practical sphere,

so that nobody need trouble to controvert them unless he likes. Confess now, you Socialistic young artist, that ideals are alluring chiefly because there isn't any danger of their being realised."

But Cyril was not disposed to break a lance with the good-humoured Rector that morning. He had put away his unfinished study, together with his materials, and, muttering something about being late for luncheon, took himself off rather hurriedly.

"We were in the midst of a wrangle," Mabel explained. "I am glad you came when you did, because I don't want to quarrel with him; but every now and then he goes a little too far."

"Just what I feel, Miss Penrose," eagerly agreed Mr. Sandford, a swarthy little, clean-shaven cleric who wore gold-rimmed spectacles. "I have had several talks with him lately upon the subject of the so-called Higher Criticism, and as long as he confines himself to serious discussion I don't complain, for I can cope with him or any other sceptic there——"

"Oh, no doubt," put in the Rector demurely.

"But what I do object to is the levity with which he treats miracles. A man may disbelieve in miracles; that is perhaps more his misfortune than his fault. But he should not assail them with such an easy and clumsy weapon as ridicule in the presence of a priest."

"I don't think he should," said Mabel.

"To say that an ass's mouth is not so formed as to be capable of articulate speech, or that anybody can produce a rainbow at will, is to beg the whole question."

"Well, I daresay he would admit that," Mabel observed.

"If so, the bad taste of such sneers becomes all the more apparent. And he is for ever bringing up Jonah," added Mr. Sandford querulously.

"For ever?" repeated the Rector, with raised eyebrows. "That certainly does appear excessive. Once was enough for the whale."

Mr. Sandford refrained in a marked manner from smiling. He could not help thinking it a great pity that his Rector, whom he sincerely respected, should so often indulge in jocularities which might be interpreted as profanities by those who did not know him. Mabel, however, knew Mr. Pickering very well—so well, indeed, that she responded to an admonition which had not been verbally addressed to her.

"Oh, I quite understand that Mr. Hadlow is better than the principles that he proclaims," said she; "only I wish he would stop proclaiming them."

"He will," the Rector assured her, "as soon as he perceives their incongruity. No man with ever so slight a sense of the ridiculous can be at one and the same time a landlord and a Communist, and as nothing can save Cyril from becoming a landlord, his Communism will drop off him, like his scepticism. Neither is more than superficial, I take it."

The above estimate of his character and views would have struck Cyril as very superficial indeed. He walked away feeling more annoyed, and also more discouraged, than he had done at any moment since his introduction to Kingsmoreton. From the first he had been under no illusion as to his power of adjusting himself to

environments which were so little to his taste. Sport he could manage, or thought he could; magisterial functions, when, in the natural course of things, they should devolve upon him, he would be able to discharge without treading upon anybody's toes; while tenants would assuredly find him easy and sympathising to deal with. But he had always recognised that one really formidable lion lay in his path, and it was a matter for regret that Rigby's advent and eloquence should have roused the animal. He did not want to distress Sir Martin and perturb the whole neighbourhood by placarding himself as a Revolutionist; yet if you are an honest man and honestly believe in certain doctrines, circumstances may arise under which silence ceases to be permissible. Cyril, therefore, seeing breakers ahead, could not but be sorry that his conscience and temperament precluded him from shaping a safer course. Nevertheless, it may be that, had he held on to the course of self-scrutiny a little longer, he would have discovered that what ruffled him was not so much the prospect of being compelled to oppose his best friends as the incident of his having gratuitously wounded one of them and gone rather near to losing his own temper in the process. She had professed, indeed, to be, as he was, an unprejudiced seeker after truth; but that, perhaps, is what none of her sex ever is, has been or will be, and it is only a fool who asks more of women than they possess. In other words, he was a little disappointed in Mabel and more than a little vexed with himself.

CHAPTER IX.

A FIASCO.

"OH dear, no," said Sir Martin, "I don't intend to give in about it. I have had a note from Bampfylde, who is getting a little nervous about his seat, and who would evidently like me to give in; but I can't oblige him. Poor dear Bampfylde is apt to forget that Kingsmoreton has always hitherto returned a Liberal, and that he only represents us on sufferance. I could put in a Liberal Unionist at the next election as easily as possible. That is, always supposing that some Radical carpet-bagger, backed by Rigby, didn't beat my man."

"I am on Rigby's side, you know," Cyril thought it his duty to announce.

"So I understand. Not that Rigby cares a pin about this dispute. Upon principle, he opposes landlords whenever and wherever he is given a chance, but he probably dislikes the jerry-builders and publicans and so forth, whom I decline to enrich, a good deal more than he does me. In any case, he can't even worry me; far less make me change my mind. I went to the extreme limit of concession—I wish now that I had not conceded so much—when I let them run up their wretched hotel and that row of flimsy lodging-houses."

"Well, it is chiefly on account of the general principle involved that I am on Rigby's side," said Cyril. "I think as he does; I can't think otherwise. But at

the same time I must admit your right of objection to my saying so."

"I assure you I claim no such right," answered Sir Martin good-humouredly; "this is a free country, and you are of an age to judge for yourself. All I claim is the right to act upon my own judgment, such as it is, while I live. After me the deluge, perhaps; though, to tell you the truth, I don't think there will be a deluge. Are you going to hear Rigby speak to-night?"

"I rather thought of going, if you don't mind."

"Not I; go by all means. I wish it were possible for me to go with you; for if the man talks nonsense, he appears, by the printed reports of his speeches, to talk it excellently, and I doubt whether he does anybody much harm. I am sure he will do me none."

The above colloquy took place in Sir Martin's study after luncheon, and, upon the strength of the permission so readily accorded, Cyril absented himself from dinner that evening in order to attend a meeting, which Mr. Rigby had promised to address, at the Market Hall. No sooner had he entered the crowded, overheated room than he was invited to take a seat on the platform beside the Town Councillor who presided and who was naturally pleased to welcome Sir Martin Hadlow's heir as an adherent. Cyril, conscious that his presence in that capacity might strike many people as a breach of good taste, would have preferred to remain in the body of the hall; but he had no excuse ready, and why, after all, should he be ashamed of his opinions? By way of compensation, he was introduced to Mr. Rigby, who talked to him in a low voice throughout the chairman's introductory remarks, and whose comments

upon the audience were scarcely what might have been expected.

"Tories at heart, every Jack one of them," said he. "If I held a brief for Colonel Bampfylde, I'd have them cheering the roof off in five minutes. You won't find seafaring men in favour of change so long as they have clothes to their backs and food enough to keep body and soul together. What was good enough for their fathers is good enough for them, and agricultural labourers, as a rule, are much of the same mind. So if it wasn't for the big towns, the world would stand still. However, I must do what I can with them."

He could do a good deal, as Cyril had already discovered, for he had an easy delivery and a simple vocabulary; his terse sentences went straight home, and if his witticisms were neither novel nor particularly brilliant, they had the effect that they were designed to have of putting his hearers in a good humour. He began, as in duty bound, by condemning the vexatious action of the lord of the manor, against which the meeting had been called together to protest, and, of course, he had something to say in derision of a social system which enabled lords of manors to block the progress and prosperity of towns wherein they did not even live. Also he wondered, in a parenthesis, whether a landlord who resided thirty miles off was a likely sort of person to promote the reforms so reasonably demanded by his constituents. But it soon became evident to one of Mr. Rigby's admirers that the speaker was merely using this question of Kingsmoreton's proposed development as a whetstone upon which to grind an axe of his own.

Rigby, in truth, had as little liking for tradesmen in a hurry to grow rich as he had for capitalists or landed proprietors, and his ostensible theme was soon thrust aside to make way for the propaganda which it was his mission to spread. He spoke with the conviction which is always in a measure convincing; he firmly believed that organised labour is destined to rule the world, now that the principle of rule by majorities has been recognised in all civilised countries; he pointed out, but did not denounce, the manifest injustice of a state of things under which a few thousands claim the lion's share, and more than the lion's share, of the wealth that the earth produces, merely remarking that a community is what its members choose to make it; only he declared that the thousands had had their day, and that the turn of the poverty-stricken millions was coming. What was imperatively necessary was organisation, and the plain duty of every working-man was to see to it that his interests and the interests of his mates should be represented by one of their own class in the House of Commons. This last was perhaps the point of the whole speech; but he knew better than to dwell upon it overmuch. Nor did he force the pathos of his peroration, which dealt with the vast multitudes of women and children who, in opulent England, stand ever on the brink of famine, while to Cyril, accustomed to the more sweeping schemes of Continental agitators, the programme that he put forward—payment of Members of Parliament, Old Age Pensions, a minimum rate of wages, Government aid to the unemployed, and so forth—sounded studiously moderate.

It did not sound that, nor anything approaching

that, to Mr. Jury, builder and contractor, who occupied the chair. Poor Mr. Jury, himself an employer of labour, and well acquainted with the difficulty of getting a remunerative job of work through in these evil days, had never bargained for such a diatribe as was being poured forth under his scandalised nose for the encouragement of Kingsmoreton idlers and loafers. Minimum wage indeed!—as if everybody did not know that the rate of wages at a given moment depends upon conditions with which it is sheer madness to attempt interference! Moreover, all this was quite irrelevant to the issue, and he was by no means sure that it was not his duty as chairman to get up and say so. Finding that his courage fell a little short of the requisite height, he wriggled and purpled and coughed deferential dissent at intervals until the orator resumed his seat. Then an idea occurred to him. Why should not young Mr. Hadlow be requested to move a vote of thanks to their distinguished visitor? He really felt too unwell to do it himself after the outrageous sentiments to which Rigby had given utterance, and possibly the sight of the future squire might remind the assemblage that he was not there to lend sanction to any crack-brained whimsies, but merely in order to censure the conduct of one obstinate and short-sighted person. Accordingly, he touched the young man's elbow and whispered his suggestion, which was complied with in a trice.

Cyril, moved and stirred beyond all the bounds of prudence, rose willingly to proclaim his hearty concurrence in every word that had fallen from Mr. Rigby's lips. He went a good deal further than Rigby had done in protesting that, for his own part, he longed to

see all privileges, all monopolies, all so-called rights in relation to land swept away. The will and welfare of the people must, he declared, prevail in the long run—with more to the like effect.

He did not know much about the trend of thought in a Devonshire townlet, or he would not have spoken like that to men whose comprehension of his meaning was hazy, but who had good reasons for loyalty to their squire. Although they might not be averse to grumbling, on occasion, at Sir Martin's arbitrary ways, they were by no means prepared to stand what they took for an indecent attack upon him by one who notoriously owed him so much. They murmured and growled, until at length one of them called out:

"Who be talkin' tu, then? Yu'm to be Squire's heir, bain't 'ee?"

"I believe I am," answered Cyril, "but——"

"Then yu'm heir to a better man nor what yu be!" retorted the interrupter.

In vain Cyril endeavoured to explain that, widely though his ideas differed from those of his kinsman on questions of public policy, he would be the last to breathe a word in disparagement of that high-minded and honourable gentleman; all he obtained in response was a volley of derisive shouts, and repeated efforts on his part to obtain a hearing met with no success at all. "Us bain't gwine to listen to 'ee!" he was told: after which his persistency brought about an attempt to drag him bodily from the platform, which was only frustrated by the intervention of Mr. Rigby.

"What did I tell you?" asked the latter, when the meeting had broken up in some disorder. "You and

I, Mr. Hadlow, may maintain that class distinctions are rubbish—one of us thinks so and doesn't often say so; the other says so and maybe doesn't think so—but they're going to last long after we are both in our graves. The worst thing you can possibly do before a popular audience is to decry the class to which you belong. Depend upon it, if they don't call you an impostor, they'll set you down as a traitor."

"I am very sorry," said the crestfallen Cyril. "I have done more harm than good to your cause, I am afraid."

Rigby jerked up his broad, round shoulders and laughed. "Oh, I daresay the cause won't suffer much," he answered drily; "between you and me, I didn't expect to accomplish a great deal for it here."

But if Cyril had worked little injury to the cause which Rigby had at heart, he had certainly served both Mr. Jury and himself an ill-turn by his impetuosity. Unfortunately, the *Kingsmoreton Gazette,* a weekly journal of wavering political bias, appeared on the following day, with a full account of the proceedings at the Market Hall and a leading article in which young Mr. Hadlow was somewhat severely handled.

"Owing to the uproar provoked by it," the writer of the article admitted, "parts of Mr. Hadlow's speech were indistinctly heard, and our report must be taken as subject to corrections, which we trust may be forthcoming; but we fear that there can be no mistake as to its drift, and this will doubtless be received with as much surprise and disapproval by our readers as it was by those present at the time. That some words of regrettable bitterness should be spoken at a public

meeting in reference to a question upon which local feeling runs high was perhaps only to be anticipated; but whatever may be customary in the foreign countries where it is said that this young gentleman has hitherto sojourned, it would be well for him to realise that Englishmen do not like to hear the head of a fine old family attacked by one of its junior members. Doubly distasteful is such conduct to us when the person assailed enjoys a well-earned reputation for benevolence; trebly so, we must reluctantly add, when the assailant is known to stand in the position of an adopted son to the subject of his unmannerly abuse. We can but hope that the lesson taught him last night will not be thrown away upon Mr. Cyril Hadlow."

The above lofty rebuke was perused by Cyril early next morning, the footman who acted as his valet having thoughtfully brought a copy of the paper upstairs with the appropriate accompaniment of hot water. Another copy lay at Lady Constantia's elbow on the breakfast-table, whither he betook himself in a mood of genuine contrition; but neither she nor Sir Martin alluded to it, while the latter displayed an eagerness to talk rapidly about anything else which was possibly meant to convey a hint. At all events, Lady Constantia's stony silence and abstracted gaze seemed to Cyril to put immediate apologies out of the question; so he swallowed his food with such show of appetite as he could command, and postponed what he had to say until he obtained release. Then, following Sir Martin into the old gentleman's study, he began:

"First of all, sir, I do hope you will acquit me of having attacked you with 'unmannerly abuse.' I

didn't behave so badly as that; though I daresay you will think that I behaved badly enough in speaking at all."

"Don't distress yourself, my dear fellow," returned Sir Martin, smiling; "sit down and take a cigarette. I am not in the least offended, and not for one moment do I believe that you were abusive. Perhaps you won't mind my saying that I do think you were rather indiscreet; but that, of course, is a very different thing. The indiscretion of this silly little newspaper might have been nipped in the bud if your meeting hadn't unluckily taken place on the eve of its appearance. As it is, I must write them a letter—you had better write to them also—explaining that you were misreported and that you were present on the occasion with my knowledge and consent. When all's said, it is only a hurricane in a horse-pond, and such things have no more importance than one chooses to give them."

"It is very generous of you to take my escapade in that spirit," said Cyril, who was really ashamed of himself, "but the fact remains that I did associate myself with Rigby's creed, and I did lend my support, for what it was worth, to your enemies."

"Quite so. Well, I have called you indiscreet. Jury and the rest of them, by the way, are no enemies of mine, and if they were, I should have to thank you for strengthening my hands against them. We shall hear no more of their precious scheme for some time to come, I suspect. As a matter of fact, they would have lost their money if I had sanctioned it, for such undertakings seldom pay, I believe, unless they are

carried out on a much more extensive scale. What Rigby's exact creed may be I don't pretend to know; but I must confess that he doesn't alarm me. England is not Australia, and much water will have run under Kingsmoreton bridge before a Labour party comes into active existence."

Cyril, who thought otherwise, kept silence; but presently he resumed:

"Although you won't allow me to apologise, it is painfully obvious that I have made an ass of myself. Perhaps I shall not do that again; but I should be afraid to promise. These things are serious to me, you see. I told you when I first came here that I should be a square peg in a round hole, and I'm more angular even than I expected to be. Don't you think the experiment had better be abandoned? You have given it a very fair and patient trial: you must feel what a failure it is. I hardly like to assert that I am grateful to you, because I must seem like the very personification of ingratitude; but this, at any rate, I can honestly say—I shall be downright glad, for some reasons, to be dismissed. What I should long for more than anything else in the world at this moment, if I had only myself to consider, would be the necessity of earning my own living again at the one calling which Nature meant me to follow."

Sir Martin laid his hand on the young man's shoulder. "But you haven't only yourself to consider," he answered; "I put in a claim. Not, to be sure, upon your gratitude. I did not choose you as my heir because I liked you—for I did not even know

you by sight at the time—but because you were the natural person to follow me. Now, however, we have become friends, and academic differences of opinion shall not part us if I can help it."

"Oh, if they were only academic!"

"Really I must not be asked to call them anything else. I accept the risk of your going in for eccentric experiments after my death; some risks one must always be prepared to take. With Spencer I grant you that there would have been none; Spencer was exceptional. But I can't disguise from myself that if my poor boy Reggie had lived, the estates would have been exposed to greater dangers than they are likely ever to incur from you. No doubt you have been told all about him—least said soonest mended. To me," Sir Martin went on, with a sigh, "nobody ever breathes his name. I suppose my good friends hereabouts think that it would hurt me to speak of him, which is a mistake. He died like a gentleman and a brave man, and that consoles me. It does not, unhappily, console his mother, as you may recollect my telling you on the evening of your arrival here."

"Yes," answered Cyril, "I recollect very well what you told me then, and I must say that in nothing has my failure been more complete than in my efforts to propitiate Lady Constantia."

This was undeniable, and Sir Martin did not deny it. He only sighed again and resumed:

"You are not to blame; nor indeed is she, poor thing. It's a case for time and patience. Just now, as I am sure you will understand, she is pardonably annoyed about what took place last night, and that,

amongst other reasons, is why I recommend your leaving us for a few weeks—or even months, if you like. The last thing I wish is that you should feel yourself tied by the leg to Kingsmoreton. Why not go up to London or take a run abroad? When you are tired of wandering you will only have to send us a letter or a telegram to say we may expect you back, and by the time you return, incidents which are best forgotten will have been forgotten."

"And forgiven?" asked Cyril hesitatingly. "Do you really think they will?"

"Oh, I mustn't answer for other households," returned Sir Martin, laughing. "Perhaps there would be no harm in your making your peace at Mannington before you depart; it doesn't seem altogether improbable that you may have done yourself some damage there."

It seemed to Cyril absolutely certain that he had; yet he could not admit that he owed excuses or retractations to Miss Penrose.

"I think," said he, "that if I go, I will do it at once, and without attempting to make my peace anywhere."

"As you please. There's always safety in saying nothing, and I don't presume to dictate. All I beg of you is not to leave me in the lurch."

Such an appeal, coming in the place of the summary ejection which Cyril had half anticipated, not to say desired, could hardly be resisted. Nor, truth to tell, was it wholly unwelcome to its recipient. To nobody —to Cyril even less than to most men—is the acknowledgment of a total fiasco palatable, and perhaps

it was due to Sir Martin, as well as to himself, that he should try again. Moreover, the prospect of a holiday caused his heart to leap within him.

CHAPTER X.

LES CHÈRES ÉTUDES.

"UPON my word," exclaimed Cyril, surveying through the open window a row of stunted trees, the young foliage of which still showed fresh and green against a strip of pale-blue sky, "there are worse places than Royal Avenue, Chelsea."

"There are a great many better ones," his mother and his two sisters responded with one voice.

"There are," the young man agreed; "but I am not disposed just now to include Kingsmoreton in the list. At this moment of joyful family reunion I feel that Kingsmoreton Court in all its glory is not arrayed like the houses over the way."

"I should hope not!" said Mrs. Hadlow; "it would have a disgracefully shabby and grimy coat if it were. I trust," she continued anxiously, "you don't mean that you are tired of your good fortune already, Cyril."

If that was his meaning, he was sensible and considerate enough to abstain from saying so, just as he had abstained from mentioning the immediate cause of his restoration to the domestic circle.

"It is a part of my good fortune that my right to periods of absence on leave is conceded," he evasively

replied. "Won't you allow me any credit for natural affection? Honestly, I'm delighted to be with you all again, and perhaps that's why murky Chelsea doesn't strike me as a bit murky this evening. That may also account for the distinct advance towards full-grown beauty which I seem to notice in Margery and Lottie."

The two girls, who were quite pretty, and who of course knew that they were, giggled; but their mother was neither to be diverted from her point nor preserved from the disappointment which her son foresaw that he would have to inflict upon her.

"Dear Cyril!" she returned; "as if you didn't know that you can't be more glad to be with us than we are to have you! It's kind of Sir Martin and Lady Constantia to remember that you have belongings too. Did they— er—send us any message?"

Now, the fact was that they had not only omitted so ordinary a courtesy, but had never, directly or indirectly, manifested any trace of the kindly remembrance attributed to them. That Lady Constantia should have ignored the existence of her cousins by marriage was not surprising; but Cyril had sometimes wondered why Sir Martin, habitually so thoughtful of others, should have imitated her in that respect. As, however, there was not the remotest probability that his mother and sisters would be invited to stay at Kingsmoreton Court, the only thing to be done was to intimate as much and to make such excuses as could be made for a sorrow-stricken old couple who had ceased to receive visitors.

"Oh, well, we mustn't be greedy," said Mrs. Hadlow philosophically. "For the girls' sake I should have liked

some sort of recognition; but your time will come sooner or later, Cyril, and then, I am sure, you will lend us all a hand."

He had already done so, and hoped to continue doing so; for he could live quite comfortably upon a quarter of his splendid allowance. Later in the evening he was enabled to make his younger brother happy by undertaking to meet sundry Cambridge liabilities, hitherto unavowed, but which may have been, as the latter declared they were, unavoidable. Hubert, whose halcyon educational days were now almost at an end, was a pleasant-looking, well set-up young man of the type which our public schools and universities turn out annually by the hundred. Less handsome than Cyril, and of fairer complexion, he was very much better dressed, had a cheery disposition, nice manners and (it was hoped) sufficient intelligence for the mercantile career which he was destined to embrace.

"Good old Cyril!" said he, with a pleased grin. "Well, I can't grudge you your luck, old man, though I don't believe you half appreciate it."

"Not half as much as you would, I am afraid," Cyril owned; "and what is worse is that I can't accommodate myself to the conditions half as easily as you could. The job that wrings my withers would have been unmixed joy to you—hunting, shooting, a dash of amateur farming, varied by attendance at Petty Sessions and so forth. Why didn't you come into the world when I did, Hubert, instead of giving me a five years' start?"

"Ah!" breathed the other regretfully. "Not that

you would have relished a high stool in the City, though."

"No; but I shouldn't have sat upon one. I should have sat and worked at the identical table which is going to see a good deal of me for the next week or two, and I should have been abundantly satisfied. Well, we must take things as they come. By the way, what do you think of our new home?"

Hubert had no hesitation in replying that he thought it a most infernal hole. His previous holidays and vacations had been spent perforce abroad, and although he had always felt that dawdling through picture-galleries and consorting with slack foreigners was a sorry use to make of leisure which might have been devoted to sport or games, he had not grumbled much at what could not be helped. But a grubby little house in Chelsea was quite another matter, and he could see no reason why his mother should continue to reside in that locality now that the artistic traditions which had been its original recommendation were no longer of importance. In short, Cyril perceived that his family secretly expected rather more of him than it might be in his power to bestow. He perceived, further, with an inward shudder, what a terrible shattering of Spanish castles would have ensued, had Sir Martin taken him at his word. There must be no more volcanic eruptions on his part, he resolved; it was his plain duty to consume his own smoke, even if it lay beyond him to arrive at the total extinction of certain fires.

Meanwhile, he rejoiced exceedingly in a temporary reversion to old habits. The old incentives to labour could not, it was true, be revived; yet for the next

fortnight he worked as hard as though he had not been deprived of them, and was scarcely seen, save at meal hours, by the rest of the household, who had their own friends and were beginning to have their own amusements and engagements. Not once during that enjoyable time did it occur to him that he ought to call upon Mrs. Spencer Hadlow until a reproachful little note from that lady reminded him of his promise.

"So you have been in London for ages, I hear," she wrote, "and haven't troubled yourself to look up your sister-in-law (I am a virtual and virtuous sister-in-law) yet. What manners! At home on Sundays from four o'clock till dinner-time, but any other day preferred. How about to-morrow at five? That is, if you think an apology is my due—as of course it is."

Soon after five o'clock that afternoon the contrite Cyril was shown into a drawing-room the excellent taste of which could not but make appeal to an artist's eye. Its prevailing tone was a soft, creamy white; large bowls and tall vases of loosely-arranged flowers relieved the severity of its somewhat scanty furniture, which was in the style of the First Empire, and Adela, herself attired in clinging white draperies reminiscent of the same period, harmonised agreeably with her frame. There were moments, and this was one of them, when Adela looked quite amazingly young.

"Sit down," said she, after extending a small, jewelled hand to her visitor. "Why do you carry your hat into the room with you? You'll be bringing your mother or your nurse next! And now for the good excuse—or the bad one."

"It's a bad one," Cyril acknowledged. "I have

been indulging in a positive debauch of work ever since I came up; I have done nothing but work, and—I simply forgot!"

Adela broke into one of her low, gurgling laughs. "And the worst of that is that it's true," she remarked. "What I value most in you is your brazen truthfulness."

"That really is a rather valuable quality, you know," Cyril pleaded.

"Oh, far above rubies! You treated them to a generous sample of it before you left Kingsmoreton, by all accounts. What wouldn't I have given to hear you haranguing the populace at the Market Hall!"

"The populace hadn't your keen perception of the ridiculous. They tried to drag me off the platform, and they would probably have kicked me out into the street if I hadn't got behind Rigby. Or was it Rigby who got in front of me? Upon second thoughts, I believe it was."

"Well, at any rate, you haven't been kicked out of Kingsmoreton Court."

"Not literally; Sir Martin's forbearance was wonderful. Nevertheless—here I am, you see."

"Yes; but that only proves that you are indispensable and inexpugnable. You are given leave to do anything you like, except desert the ship; you are only entreated to go away for a time and cool down."

"It isn't so much that as that Sir Martin can't believe I am in earnest. I suppose he is right; I suppose if I were really in earnest, I should desert the

ship, as you say. However that may be, I have determined to leave politics alone for the future."

"Poor fellow! Does it hurt much?"

"It does a little—not unendurably. The fact is that I have a mother and a couple of sisters and a six-foot brother whom it would be hardly fair to jettison."

"I see them from here, with their open beaks sticking out of the nest. And what did Mabel think of it all?"

"I can't tell you; I hadn't the courage, or even the common politeness, to call and say good-bye to her. Oh, of course I know what she must have thought; she is too sensible to have taken any view but one of my behaviour."

"Too limited, you mean; your aggrieved tone of voice betrays you. Dear me! this is very sad. But lovers' quarrels!——"

"We are not lovers," Cyril declared, "and it wouldn't surprise me to hear that we are no longer friends."

"You *were* friends, then? When you admit that, you admit the rest."

"I don't see why. Aren't you and I friends?"

"Such good ones that I forgive you for having forgotten me, which is more than any lover has done ever since the world began. It will all come right about Mabel, whom you certainly haven't forgotten, or you wouldn't have blushed at the sound of her name. Oh yes, you really did blush. Not in the usual unbecoming way, because you have one of those thick

skins which go with certain kinds of dark hair; but I saw it in the whites of your eyes."

"Really," exclaimed Cyril, laughing, "there's nothing that you don't see! You know more about me than I know about myself."

It was not at all unlikely that she did. In any case, she soon heard from his own lips all that there was to be told respecting his present manner of life and his plans for the immediate future. She possessed in a remarkable degree the faculty for evoking confidences which is supposed to be one of the prerogatives of her sex, and if she did not always understand what was said to her, she invariably looked as if she did. Cyril's idea of her was that she might possibly be a trifle insincere, but that she was singularly quick-witted and sympathetic; so he expanded in her company as plants expand in a warm atmosphere. With her elbows on the arms of her chair and her chin resting in the hollow of one hand, she listened absorbedly to pæans in praise of art, and although she owned herself a complete technical ignoramus, she realised, or professed to realise, that with such an interest in life as that, a man might well prefer to hold aloof from politics or social functions.

"I'm coming to see you in your studio one of these days," she abruptly announced after a time. "You might do a pen-and-ink study of me, by way of contrast to your Jacob Beer. Do you fancy yourself at portraits?"

"No," he answered; "I haven't the trick of catching facial expression. I should rather like to draw you as

you are now, though, for the sake of the lines and the drapery."

"Then I'll go to Royal Avenue, lines, drapery and all," she declared. "It will be an excuse for meeting; for I see how vain it would be to invite you to come here and meet smart people—I, who *do* possess the trick of interpreting facial expression! Shall I be conventional and call on your mamma at the same time?"

Cyril made the only reply that could be made, and a few days later Adela kept her word. Descending from his studio to the forlorn little drawing-room on the ground floor, in search of some rough sketches which he had left there, he found the elder and the younger Mrs. Hadlow chatting together like intimate friends, and had occasion—not for the first time—to admire the latter's skill in suiting herself to her company.

"Oh, I quite agree that this neighbourhood won't do for you after school days come to an end," Adela was saying. "There are heaps of furnished houses to be had for a mere song; I'm always hearing of them. And of course your girls will have to be presented. That need not be at all an expensive business either; I'll manage it for you and give you some useful tips when the time comes."

No wonder the anxious mother was pleased and grateful; no wonder she turned a smiling countenance towards her son, saying:

"Do you hear that, Cyril? I always told you that straitened means didn't necessarily imply Royal Avenue, and at least we can house ourselves now without in-

sisting upon a room that is capable of being used as a studio."

"That reminds me," observed Adela, rising, "that while there is a studio I must take advantage of it. I don't want to miss my one chance of being immortalised."

She explained that her portrait was to be executed by an artist whose etchings were destined to achieve undying fame, and asked: "Will you come up with us, if you think we ought to have a chaperon?"

The elder lady laughed and excused herself on the plea of an appointment for which she was already late. Perhaps she thought that the couple whom she was forsaking were very well able to take care of themselves, and if she did think so, she was not far wrong. Adela, at any rate, enjoyed that reputation, together with a name for making herself at home under all circumstances which she proceeded to justify, as soon as she had been conducted to Cyril's bare workshop at the top of the house, by divesting herself of her hat and jacket, sinking into the only armchair and lighting a cigarette.

"Now fire away," said she. "Leave out the smoke, though, or you'll convey false impressions to posterity. What I stand for—or at least sit for—is graceful languor, combined with high gentility. As a study of those attributes, am I worth while?"

"In that pose you're worth anything to a capable draughtsman," answered Cyril, surveying her critically; "but whether I have the capacity that you deserve is quite another question."

It was a question which interested her less than it

did him. As she had candidly avowed, her ostensible wish to be portrayed by his deft pen was only a pretext for the renewal of an interrupted intimacy, and while he was bringing all his attention to bear upon the task that he had in hand, she elicited from him definite, if somewhat absent-minded, replies to various queries which she did not always put in an interrogative form.

"I think," she observed meditatively at length, by way of comment upon some of the information thus imparted to her, "it would do you no harm to enlarge the circle of your acquaintance a little. You must come and dine with me some evening when I can scrape a few people together."

"I would much rather dine with you some evening when you can't," he answered.

"Very pretty of you to say so; but you'll find when you know me better that I show to increased advantage against a background. Besides, I have a fancy for making a celebrity of you."

"I am afraid you won't contrive to do that," said Cyril.

"You have no idea of what a lot of things I can do. I have neither rank nor looks nor influence, you may say. Quite true, and I am ridiculously poor into the bargain. For all that, I do give tidy little dinners, and I take care that nobody shall ever be bored at them. Consequently, if you would like to meet the Prime Minister or the President of the Royal Academy or the newest South African bounder or the last American duchess, you have only to say so."

He was to discover later that the boast was not

unwarranted; but neither then nor at any time did her undeniable social prominence make much appeal to him. What he liked in Adela was her swift, unfailing comprehension. Perhaps she laughed a little at some of his notions; but if she did, her amusement was of the kind which implies amity and a measure of fellow-feeling, and every now and then she amused him in return by shrewd and original comments. To achieve a satisfactory likeness of her was, as he speedily recognised, rather beyond him; but they conversed together with mutual satisfaction for the best part of an hour, and would have gone on longer, had not Hubert interrupted them by marching in unceremoniously, pipe in mouth.

The intruder, taken aback by the quite unexpected sight of a lady in his brother's den, reddened and begged pardon; but Adela, to whom the acquisition of a new male acquaintance never came amiss, set him completely at his ease in a very few minutes. She knew—the astonishing little lady!—all about the recent boat race and the inter-University sports; she mentioned the winners of the several events by name, suggesting reasons for their victories, and quite won Hubert's heart by her intelligent appreciation of contests which not one woman in ten ever hears about.

"Rather!" he heartily responded when, on preparing to depart, she asked him whether he could be persuaded to come with his brother and dine in Sloane Gardens; "I should like it most awfully."

"And I like him most awfully," Adela said, mimicking the young man's voice, on the doorstep, whither

Cyril presently accompanied her; "though he isn't a bit like you. So nice and fresh and clean!"

"Thank you very much," answered Cyril; "I am nasty and dirty, no doubt."

"No; but you're a different type. Oh, a vastly superior one, if it comes to that; only one can't help adoring youth. It's almost a pity that Mabel Penrose is irrevocably booked to you; your brother and she would have been so admirably matched, and with her fortune, which you don't need, she might have preserved him from the abhorred city, poor boy!"

"Mrs. Spencer and I have found a mate for you, Hubert," Cyril announced, on his return to the studio. "A Miss Penrose, who lives near Kingsmoreton. Very pretty, a great sportswoman and sole heiress to her father's estates."

"That will do me down to the ground, thanks," replied Hubert. "And I'll tell you what, old man; you shall marry Mrs. Spencer, who ought to suit you as well as anybody, I should say. Besides, it's the least you can do after stepping into her late lamented's shoes."

What absurd irrelevancies sometimes bring about an effect of swift illumination! Cyril could well laugh at the idea of his espousing the widowed Adela; yet—how or why he knew not—there flashed into his mind for the first time, while he laughed, a conviction that the only woman whom he would ever wish to make his wife was Mabel Penrose.

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. SPENCER'S LITTLE DINNER.

"THE only essential thing about a husband," said Lady Tilehurst didactically, "is that he should have at least five thousand a year. Good looks, good temper, good breeding and so forth are luxuries, not necessities. If you can't get them at home, nothing—least of all a husband—prevents you from going farther afield in search of them."

"Five thousand a year isn't much," Violet Ord observed.

"I never said it was," snapped her sister; "I said it was the least that could be made to do. There isn't an unlimited supply of bachelors or widowers with that income either, goodness knows! I have done my level best for you, Violet, and I tell you plainly that I am near the end of my patience. If nobody that I can lay hands upon is good enough for you, you had better marry your Devonshire lout."

"I think I shall."

"Do!—it isn't I who shall forbid the banns, I promise you. You have cost me a lot of money, first and last, and given me endless bother; but of course you're my sister, and I don't grudge you anything in reason. What sickens me is that you really don't seem to have the smallest self-respect."

"That is the sort of defect that would naturally shock you," remarked Violet. "I don't quite know how I have exhibited it, though."

"Why, by behaving as if you were independent, as if you were in your own house and could take your own time. People who can't even pay for the clothes that they have on their backs——"

"That will do, thanks," interrupted Violet; "I have heard that once or twice before."

The poor girl heard it almost every day; for Lady Tilehurst—the famous, charming, all-conquering Lady Tilehurst—was by no means the same person in the privacy of home life that she was in the high circles of which she had been for some years an acknowledged leader. A vicious, ungenerous woman, to speak the plain truth about her, whose leadership, such as it was, had already become precarious by reason of her open indiscretions and whose beauty was fading with a rapidity which did not improve her temper. About her, as about many others of similar social prominence, endless scandalous stories were current; but what made her unique was that in her case they were all true. Wonder was often expressed that Lord Tilehurst did not divorce her, and it may be that some such wonder occasionally flitted across his lordship's own dull mind; but he probably did not care to face the ordeal of cross-examination at the hands of a pitiless barrister, and he had been heard to say that, after all, Ida gave a man no trouble, apart from her infernal extravagance. He himself was a negligible person, of considerable wealth and unobtrusively coarse tastes, with whom such reputable relatives as his aunt, Lady Constantia

Hadlow, had long ceased to hold communication. Lady Constantia, it is needless to add, would neither speak to Lady Tilehurst nor hear her spoken of; but of course the hostility of an old woman who lived down in Devonshire all the year round and knew nobody was a matter of small importance. Unfortunately, there were other old women, less tolerant and less obscure, who were beginning to mutter that the line must be drawn somewhere, and Lady Tilehurst was uneasily conscious of a recent slackening in the stream of her daily invitations. That also did not improve her temper, and was accountable, perhaps, for the asperity of her next remark.

"You're dining with Adela Hadlow to-night, aren't you? Why hadn't she the decency to ask me?"

"I suppose she didn't want you," was Violet's somewhat uncivil suggestion.

"Oh, rubbish! She would be glad enough to have me; only she knows I shouldn't go; so she saves herself a snub by leaving me out. Which would be rather cheek of her, if it signified. Do you meet your lout there?"

"Goodness, no! He isn't in London I am glad to say."

Nevertheless he was in London, and his rubicund visage, surmounting a white waistcoat, was the very first object to catch Violet's displeased eye when she entered the Sloane Gardens drawing-room that evening. Inwardly execrating her hostess, while exchanging affectionate greetings with her, she foresaw that Bob was her inevitable fate at the dinner-table, for Adela, whose guests were always selected with intention, could not

have made choice of him on any other ground. It was therefore a great surprise and relief to find herself being escorted downstairs presently by a particularly nice-looking youth, with a bright smile and sleek brown hair, who had been introduced to her as Mr. Hubert Hadlow. So much so that she could not help exclaiming:

"If I were the Royal Humane Society, you should have a gold medal!"

"What for?" inquired her surprised cavalier.

"For saving me from being dragged down by one of these horrors," she replied.

"That's awfully flattering to me," Hubert remarked; "but are the other fellows horrors? I was just thinking what a well turned-out lot they were."

Miss Ord had only noticed one of them. She took stock of the rest on reaching the dining-room, where two round tables had been laid, and noted with joy, while she and her companion seated themselves at the first of these, that Bob Luscombe was motioned towards the second, over which Adela presided.

"Good!" she murmured. "I must say that things are always cleverly contrived in this house. Well turned-out we may be, the whole sixteen of us; but we're rather a scratch pack, so it was prudent to divide us into halves until meat and drink had mellowed us all. You and I belong to the mere youth and beauty section; our betters at the other table, who will begin to look at us with longing eyes after the champagne has been twice round, stand for high distinction. At least, with one exception they do."

"I hope my poor brother isn't the one exception," said Hubert.

"He? Oh no; he's a great artist, isn't he?"

"Well—he is an artist."

"Then if he isn't great already, Adela will very soon make him so." She caught Cyril's eye at the moment and nodded smilingly in acknowledgment of his bow. "I met your brother not long ago in Devonshire, where I was staying with my uncle Mr. Penrose," she went on. "Has he told you that he is going to marry Mabel Penrose?"

"Rather not! On the contrary, he told me that I was. This is an uncommon nasty knock to get just as one was shaping plans for a life of dignified ease with an attractive heiress. Do you mean to say that that ruffianly old Cyril was pulling my leg all the time?"

"I am afraid he must have been. However, it isn't a dead certainty that Mabel will take him, if that's any comfort to you. Look sharp and you may cut him out yet."

"Oh, well, I was only joking," Hubert thought it necessary to explain. "As a matter of fact, I think marrying for money a pretty contemptible sort of thing to do."

"Oh, shake hands! All the same there are a good many girls who can hardly help incurring your contempt."

"I was thinking of men; I won't say so much about girls. Very likely the screw is often put onto them in a way that we know nothing of, except by hearsay."

"You can't know even by hearsay. Only women

know, and they don't tell. Suppose we talk about something else."

They developed a rapid mutual liking while talking about a variety of other subjects, with periodical reversions to the one which poor Violet could seldom forget. More than once in the course of an artless, disjointed colloquy did she wish that her neighbour were possessed of the prescribed five thousand a year; for, like Adela, she found him "nice and fresh and clean," a delightful contrast to the elderly scamps whom she had enraged her sister by rejecting. To say that her heart was touched would be asserting far too much. She doubted whether she had a heart, in the sentimental acceptation of that term, nor, if she had had one, would she have dared to let it get out of hand. Hubert, however, whom Nature had dowered with the above organ in a healthy condition of susceptibility, was by no means so immune. He thought Miss Ord, to use his own unspoken phrase, "out of sight the jolliest girl he had ever come across," and if the adjective does not sound specially apposite, allowance must be made for the stinted vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon youth, in which one word has perforce to do duty for a score.

He was, at all events, sufficiently smitten to experience an absurd but distinct sensation of discomfiture on hearing that the young lady was already as good as betrothed to his Cambridge friend Luscombe, a fellow who was all very well in his way, but whom nobody could dream of calling worthy of her. This false information reached him upon no less an authority than that of Bob Luscombe himself, whom he had not

seen in the drawing-room and who had been placed behind his back at dinner, but who sat down beside him as soon as the ladies had retired.

"I say, young fellow," Bob began jocosely, after greetings had been exchanged, "I've a bone to pick with you. What do you mean by making up to my girl, eh?"

"Your girl!" returned Hubert, displaying the frank disgust which is one of the privileges of intimacy. "If it comes to that, what the deuce do you mean by calling Miss Ord your girl?"

Bob chuckled. He had had enough champagne, followed by port, to be exhilarated and expansive. "I mean," he replied, "that poachers will be prosecuted with the utmost rigour of the law. Oh, of course you weren't really poaching; I'm not jealous, bless your soul! Only please bear in mind that the lady whom you took down to dinner is the future Mrs. Luscombe, because that's a fact. Ain't she a ripper! —what?"

He went on to state that if the engagement had not yet been made public, it very soon would be, adding confidentially:

"The truth is that we had a bit of a row some weeks ago when she was staying down at Mannington, near my place. By the way, you're going to pay me a long visit in the summer, you know; that's a promise, and you won't be let off, I can tell you. Yes, we both got on our hind-legs, she and I; but I'll put that all right this evening. In point of fact, I suspect that was why Mrs. Spencer asked me to dine. Awfully good sort, Mrs. Spencer—what?"

Hubert assented, though with less enthusiasm than he might have exhibited had he not felt that Mrs. Spencer would have been an even better sort if she could have been contented to mind her own business. Well, the loves and quarrels of Luscombe and Miss Ord were certainly no business of his; so he joined his friend, by invitation, in a final glass of port, wished him joy and listened without visible ill humour to further confidences.

At the same time, he did not much care to resume conversation with a lady who was apparently not quite what he had taken her for; although, when he went upstairs with the other men, she openly beckoned to him to approach. For the rest, Bob jostled him aside without ceremony before he could obey and was seated close to Violet before she could escape.

"Look here; I'm sorry I put your back up that evening at Mannington," the contrite wooer announced, "and it sha'n't occur again. A man can't say more than that, can he?"

"A man needn't say as much unless he likes," Violet answered. "When things offend me I generally take good care that they shall not occur again."

"But do you accept my apology or don't you?" demanded her admirer, who was more accustomed to fighting than apologising.

She made an eloquent grimace. Gladly would she have responded with a round and resolute negative; but a conviction that she had better accept anything short of his hand, and confidence in her power to

restrain him from offering that for some time to come, led her to temporise.

"Oh, if you're sorry, you're sorry, and there's an end of it," she returned impatiently. "What brings you here? I thought you hated London."

"So I do; but there's somebody in London whom I love to see," replied Bob, with an amorous grin. "I'm selling some horses at Tattersall's on Monday too," he added. And then, after a pause, "I say, do you think Lady Tilehurst would receive me if I called?"

"I am quite sure she wouldn't," Violet declared; "Ida never receives anybody at this time of year, except by appointment."

"Well, how about making an appointment? Through you, I mean, as I haven't the pleasure of your sister's acquaintance."

"I think not, thanks very much. My sister has a preference for choosing her own acquaintances."

The complexion of the irascible Bob assumed a richer hue. "Right you are!" he cried. "I'm no thruster; I don't want to force myself upon her, or upon you either. If you'd rather have my room than my company, you won't need to tell me so twice."

She had to smoothe him down. Humiliating though the obligation was, no alternative existed, save the too costly one of giving him his final dismissal. What remained attainable, and what, with some pains, she gained, was a respite. By dint of judiciously mingled snubs and cajoleries she drove the notion into his thick head that she was not won yet and might be lost through precipitancy. He likewise gathered that a host

of engagements which she could not break must prevent him from obtaining anything more than rare and fugitive glimpses of her if he stayed in London, and she assured him that she would certainly be at Mannington again by July, allowing him to infer that he would find her more approachable then.

Presently her hostess came to her rescue. Adela, whose veiled, sleepy eyes saw everything that took place within their range, had not failed to note Mr. Luscombe's heightened colour, and as she knew from of old that he was apt to be choleric in his cups, she judged the moment appropriate for effecting a change of partners. Personally, she disliked the man; but she could make herself pleasant to him, as to all sorts and conditions of men, and indeed he was under the impression that she was a staunch ally of his. She therefore detached him without difficulty from the grateful Violet, who forthwith renewed her signal to Hubert.

"Why don't you come when you are called?" she asked reproachfully, after the young man had drawn near. "A little bit of alacrity on your part would have saved me."

"For the second time in one evening?" asked Hubert, undisguisedly pleased. "But how was I to know that you wanted to be saved from Luscombe?"

"As if it were possible to have any other wish in connection with him! Perhaps he is a friend of yours, though."

"Well, in a sort of a way he is. We have always got on together all right, and he asked me just now to go down and stay with him in the summer."

"Did he? Then for mercy's sake come, and be my shield and buckler!"

"I will like a shot; though I was coming anyhow for my own sake. Will you be with your relations there?"

She made a gesture of assent. "If I possessed a home—which I don't—it would be Mannington. I only wish I were there now; but I have got to go through the season to the bitter end because—well, for family reasons which wouldn't interest you. I daresay the London season doesn't interest you much either."

"It's a sealed book to me," Hubert confessed; "I'm an absolute outsider. I don't know a soul in the room to-night, except Mrs. Spencer and Luscombe. Who are all the others? Very smart people, I suppose."

"Smartish, some of them. That tall woman with the splendid pearls is Mrs. Jack Robinson, whom you must know by reputation. *She's* really smart of course —the 'Jack' is the badge of her smartness—and that swarthy, yellow creature beside her is young Beutelschneider, a naturalised German Jew, whose father has just been given a peerage. The little bald man with the tuft on his chin who is standing on tiptoe to talk to your brother is Lord Oswestry. He isn't smart, but he's distinguished, or he wouldn't be here. Shockingly rich and a great patron of art. Invited for your brother, most likely."

"And is that Lady Oswestry prodding him in the back with her fan?"

"Oh no; Adela never asks husbands and wives on

the same evening. The fat woman who can't manage to attract his attention is Madame de Roubloff. She poses as a Revolutionist, but is really in the pay of the Russian Government, they say. Lord Oswestry poses as a Radical and a philanthropist; so she probably thinks he is game for a subscription to what she darkly calls The Cause."

After a few more of the ladies and gentlemen present had been rapidly described for his instruction, Hubert asked, "And you, yourself? Are you one of the smart ones?"

Violet pondered. "Well—am I? In a faint and reflected fashion perhaps I am, because of my sister. But I have no ambition that way; I should like to be——"

"What would you like to be?" Hubert inquired, as she left her sentence unfinished.

"Oh, I don't know. A peeress in my own right, or a merry peasant—or you. Something cheerful and independent of that sort."

"But I am not independent."

"Aren't you? Well, you're cheerful, anyhow. I can't imagine you contemplating self-destruction."

The resolute advance of a young man who had been hovering in the vicinity for some minutes prevented Hubert from ascertaining whether Miss Ord ever felt tempted to resort to such extreme measures, and he saw no more of her until she wished him a friendly good-night on her way out of the room.

"I'm awfully sorry for that poor girl," he told his brother, while they were walking homewards together. "From what she said, I expect she'll be bullied into

marrying Luscombe, and she can't bear the sight of him."

"Oh, she puts it like that, does she?" said Cyril. "I don't know who is going to bully her, except Luscombe himself, and she has probably strength enough to resist him if she chooses. What I daresay she won't be quite strong enough to resist is the temptation of sharing his income."

"I don't suppose you know much about her," rejoined Hubert, with some warmth, and embarked upon a tirade against the vulgarity of cheap sneers, to which his brother, whose thoughts were otherwise occupied, paid scant attention.

"Talk about the irony of fate!" exclaimed Cyril at length, although nobody had been talking about it; "what do you think of Lord Oswestry, who, it seems, owns one of the finest collections of etchings in Europe, having spotted me the moment he saw those Paris studies of mine which I sold to a magazine *pour un morceau de pain* and having made inquiries all over the place—so he says—in the hope of getting me to execute a commission for him? How I should have jumped at his price a few months ago! How I should jump at it now if poor dear Sir Martin would but do me the favour of turning me adrift!"

"If I can be of any service in the matter," said Hubert, laughing, "please command me. Why not suggest to the old boy that you have a younger brother who wouldn't object at all to being his heir?"

"I wish to Heaven I could! Anyhow, I have more than half a mind to run over to Paris and finish that series for Lord Oswestry, pay or no pay. I should love

the job, and it would be a good excuse for prolonging my leave of absence from Kingsmoreton. Now, Hubert, here's your chance. You are going to stay with Luscombe, he tells me. Profit by the occasion to pay your respects to Sir Martin and Lady Constantia and your addresses to Miss Penrose. Win all their hearts, cast me into the shade, and earn the eternal gratitude of a humble artist who only asks permission to pursue his calling unmolested."

CHAPTER XII.

THE RETURN OF THE TRUANT.

On a sultry July day Cyril Hadlow quitted the classic shades and glades of Barbizon after a hilarious fortnight spent there with French artists, comrades of his student days, and set forth to tramp through the forest of Fontainebleau on his way to the railway station, whither his luggage had preceded him. To complete the series of etchings, representing woodland scenes in the neighbourhood of Paris, which Lord Oswestry coveted, had been for him a labour of love, but had likewise been highly remunerative: for his patron, who had become also his friend, had refused to give him the commission without paying "a fair price" in advance, and as the money value of works of art can only be defined as what they will fetch, it must be assumed that his lordship, an experienced judge, knew what he was about when he drew the cheque which went straight

from the recipient's account to that of a lady in Royal Avenue, Chelsea, who needed funds for a summer outing. After all, comfortable though he had been made, Cyril was not so overburdened with cash but that this windfall had been welcome to him. Even more welcome was the fact which it attested, and of which assurance had reached him from other quarters, that for the future the work of his own hands might be relied upon to provide him with a steady income. What reward more gratifying than appreciation has this world to bestow upon a conscientious craftsman, unless it be consequent independence?

Progressing at a leisurely pace beneath overarching greenery and across sandy undulations, Cyril looked back upon the incidents of the past two months with a gratification which was nearly—not quite—unmixed. Social London, made accessible to him by the good offices of Mrs. Spencer Hadlow and the hospitality of Lord and Lady Oswestry, had been pleasant enough; this unforeseen renewal of former ties and discarded habits had been pleasanter still; pleasant had been Sir Martin's letters, telling him that, although he was missed, he must on no account curtail his holiday, and pleasant the thought that if he could not be independent in the fullest sense of the term, he was at least no longer an adopted pauper.

There was, however, one thought which gave him no pleasure at all, and which had haunted him with irritating persistency ever since it had first taken shape as the result of mere banter between him and his brother. This was the altogether absurd one that in Mabel Penrose he had encountered the one woman

of his dreams. It was absurd, for any number of good reasons. In the first place, she was not the woman of his dreams, nor anything like that vague being; secondly, she was the embodiment of traditions and prejudices which he would never be able to assimilate; moreover, to skip thirdly, fourthly and the rest, he really was not in love with the girl. He had told himself as much so often that the assertion had lost something of its original force, and of course, if he did not love her, the extreme repugnance that he felt to the idea of her marrying anybody else was rather difficult to explain; still he tried the effect of repeating it once more. Then he demanded of the rocks and trees whether they had ever beheld so ridiculous a spectacle as a man in doubt whether he had lost his heart or not, and their impassivity seemed to imply that they never had. Young women, it is said (though proof is lacking), are sometimes ignorant of the state of their own affections; but surely such uncertainty is not a masculine attribute! Well, he was going straight back to Kingsmoreton now, and doubtless he would soon discover whether he was the ass that he half took himself for or not. Unfortunately, the discovery that he did love Mabel would prove him beyond all question to be an ass; for it was certain that she did not love him, nor could there be any reasonable hope of their living happily together as husband and wife if she did. You may agree to differ from your best friend upon many important points, but hardly from a partner for life.

To differ in opinion from Sir Martin Hadlow was never a disagreeable experience, by reason of that

courteous old gentleman's invariable readiness to respect standpoints which were not his own. One of the first things that he said to his heir, whose hands he grasped affectionately some forty-eight hours later, was:

"I congratulate you, my dear fellow. According to my old-fashioned ideas, a man with your expectations ought not to work for hire; but I quite understand your thinking that he ought, so I am glad for your sake that your holiday has been a busy one."

"One likes to feel that there are some outlets for energy at which one isn't a complete bungler," Cyril pleaded.

"That's why I congratulate you—as well as Oswestry. And I daresay you won't mind my congratulating myself upon having you and your energies home again."

"Oh no; I'm only astonished that you should," answered Cyril; "and a little ashamed. But I'm going to behave better; I shall never be seen or heard on a platform again."

"We have forgotten that you ever were," Sir Martin declared; "don't remind us of it."

"I won't," Cyril promised, perceiving to whom in particular that needless admonition was meant to apply.

But if, as was probable, Lady Constantia had forgotten nothing, her reception of the returned wanderer was a shade less chilling than might have been anticipated. Of course she was not glad to see him back; but perhaps she was thankful to him for having re-

mained so long away, and in any case he fancied that she had now the air of accepting him as inevitable. She even unbent so far as to hope that he had enjoyed himself during his absence.

"If I didn't know that my dear mother-in-law was blessed with a cast-iron constitution," remarked Adela, who had recently arrived from London, "I should wonder whether she wasn't beginning to break up. She treated you almost amiably this evening, and she was positively playful with your brother when he came over the other day."

"Is Hubert staying with Luscombe, then?" asked Cyril.

His informant nodded. "Yes, and if you don't take care, he'll eclipse you all round. Mabel already adores him."

"I thought very likely she would."

"Did you indeed? Perhaps you also thought it likely that the old people here would fall in love with him at first sight and scarcely disguise their regret that he is your junior."

"They can't regret it more than I do, and I should be the last to blame them for recognising what is so obvious—that he is the very man for them, whereas I can never be anything but a dubious makeshift. I'll retire in his favour with alacrity if they'll let me."

It was in Cyril's sitting-room that the above dialogue was being held, after the customary rubber of whist had been played and lights extinguished in the lower part of the house. Adela, perched sideways upon the sill of the open window with one foot on the ground and the other slowly swinging, gazed

down at the moonlit garden beneath her and exhaled cigarette smoke into the dewy fragrance of the night.

"The funny thing is that you mean what you say," she remarked musingly.

"There's nothing so very funny in my meaning it. Money and position say little to me; I am not fond of country life or country sports, and of course I can't pretend to be fond of Lady Constantia, who hates me."

"Oh, I daresay she would hate your brother if he were promoted to be the heir. That won't happen; because nothing is more sacred to Sir Martin than the principle of primogeniture, except his word, which has been given to you."

"I'll release him from it to-morrow."

"You won't get the chance. Do you know, I am not sure that I admire your self-effacement. It has a noble sound; but isn't it, saving your presence, a little bit like funk? You knew when you came here that you weren't going to have a walk over; but you were full of pluck then; you meant to face all the difficulties of the situation and conquer them. Which inspired me to back you up instead of putting spokes in your wheels, as I might have done. How about the claims of a modest partisan? Doesn't it strike you that you owe me any consideration?"

Cyril responded at once to an appeal which was not ill conceived.

"I owe you much more than I can hope to repay," he acknowledged, "including the introduction to Lord Oswestry which has caused me to wax fat and

kick. You are quite right; it isn't in the least noble or unselfish to shirk what one has deliberately undertaken, and I won't forsake Sir Martin, although I still say that he is entitled and welcome to forsake me."

Adela swung herself to her feet, laughing, and tossed away the end of her cigarette. "Sir Martin," said she, "will never forsake Mr. Micawber. But really and seriously I can't answer for Mabel Penrose's fidelity if you neglect her much longer. To-morrow afternoon I am going to drive you over to Stawell Abbey to tea. You will find her there, feebly attempting to round up young Luscombe and Violet Ord, who will have given her the slip. Then you and she can fight it out, or plunge into one another's arms, or both. I'll make it my business to detach the too fascinating Hubert."

On the following day her word was kept and her prediction was verified to the letter. After a rather long drive through deep lanes and across steep hills, surmounted by the simple Devonian and ancient Roman plan of going straight up one side and down the other, the visitors from Kingsmoreton reached Stawell Abbey, a vast, rambling mansion to which successive generations of prosperous Luscombes had added wings and storeys with an eye rather to increased accommodation than to architectural symmetry, and on the broad lawn in front of the house they beheld Mrs. Luscombe, seated all alone under a tent-umbrella, whither servants were in the act of carrying tea-tables and trays.

"The young people will be here presently," she an-

nounced. "At least, I hope they will; but young people never seem to know what time it is. More than an hour ago Bob took Miss Ord round to the stables to show her a horse that he thinks would carry her, and as they didn't come back, Mabel kindly said she would go and look for them."

Adela, glancing at Cyril out of the corner of her eye, remarked: "Now you had better go and look for your brother, who is looking for Mabel, who is looking for other people who aren't in a hurry to be found. Quite like the house that Jack built, isn't it? I don't think I will start to look for you until I have had my tea; but I may be expected in due course."

Mrs. Luscombe showed her sanction of a flirtation to which she had become reconciled by simpering idiotically. Violet Ord, to be sure, was no great catch; but, on the other hand, it is such a steadying thing for a young man to be enamoured of a girl belonging to his own class! Dimly suspicious, however, of the difficulty of classifying the notorious Lady Tilehurst's sister, she was particularly anxious to question Mrs. Spencer, who knew all about everybody, upon this subject; so she said:

"Well really, Mr. Hadlow, if you don't mind, it would be very good of you to let them know that tea is ready. You won't find them at the stables, I am afraid, but I daresay one of the grooms will tell you which way they went."

It was only after the expiration of a full half-hour that Cyril, in patient compliance with instructions received, came upon his brother and Miss Penrose emerg-

ing from one of the shrubberies near the house, to which a devious pursuit had led him, and at the same moment Adela strolled up from another direction to join the group.

"So much the best way of playing hide-and-seek is to sit still," she observed. "I didn't stir until I knew that you must be heading for tea. The consequence of my having finished mine is that one of you will have to go fasting a little longer. Yes, you, Mr. Hubert. I'm sorry; but the time has come for you to fulfil your pledge, and I can't let you off. Your brother," she added, turning to Cyril in explanation, "is going to conduct me round the stables, so that I may know what is the right thing to say about all these animals and avoid exasperating their owner when he has them stripped for my edification."

Hubert, who had saluted his elder brother after the undemonstrative British fashion, appeared to be no reluctant victim. Adela and he were soon out of sight, and then Mabel said:

"I am glad to see you back at last. Why did you turn and fly the country immediately after striking out such a very original line for yourself?"

"Sir Martin thought it would be tactful on my part to disappear for a time," answered Cyril, "and I quite agreed with him. Wasn't that a better way of confessing that I had acted injudiciously than making a public recantation and apology?"

"But surely nobody expected you to do that. You had a right to sympathise with Mr. Rigby and propose a vote of thanks to him, if you liked."

"Perhaps I had: but it *was* injudicious—come!"

"Oh, of course I think it was rather a pity; only it seems to me still more of a pity not to have the courage of one's opinions."

"That makes twice within the last twenty-four hours that I have been accused of cowardice," remarked Cyril. "Mrs. Spencer was as hard upon me as you are because I ventured to suggest that things would be more comfortable all round if Sir Martin could be induced to adopt Hubert in my place and give me the coveted order of the sack. Yet I should have thought that there was more moral courage in acknowledging a palpable failure than in blundering ahead with one's eyes shut."

Mabel looked puzzled. "But are you a failure?" she asked. "Sir Martin, I know, doesn't think at all the worse of you for siding with people who, after all, had a sort of a grievance."

"Oh, he's generous; he can afford to be, because he knows perfectly well how futile my antics were. Still he must have thought them in shocking bad taste, and so, I am sure, did you."

The truthful maiden was fain to admit that something like that might have been her criticism, had she permitted herself to express one. However, she withdrew the graver charge. "Of course, if you were convinced that you had acted mistakenly, you hadn't any views left to stick to."

"Well, I am convinced that it was a mistake for the heir to the estate to act as I did; I am not at all convinced that I hold mistaken views."

She read him a little lecture upon the subject of some of his views which both amused and provoked

him, although he was inconsistent enough to rejoice that orthodoxy had so stout a champion in her. Women ought to be religious: what man does not instinctively feel that when they are irreligious they are in a parlous state? Cyril would have preferred to be reproached for having gone away without wishing Miss Penrose good-bye; but since she did not seem to have noticed or resented that breach of good manners on his part, he could hardly ask pardon for it. Upon the whole, she disappointed him, strictly moderate as his expectations had been. That she still liked him very well, if not quite so well as at first, but that she was leagues removed from loving him, was neither surprising nor depressing: what had to be qualified as both was the certitude—it practically amounted to certitude now—that he did not love her. She was good, she was sensible, she was even beautiful, in her white dress against a background of dark-green foliage, with slant rays of sunlight turning her chestnut hair to gold; but —hang it all! why not face the truth?—she was more than a little commonplace. Oh no; one doesn't at the age of eight-and-twenty fall in love with a face or a figure; one merely regrets, perhaps, that it is no longer possible to do so.

"Do you know," Cyril said at length, "that all these observations of yours only show how thoroughly you are of one mind with me, not to mention Sir Martin and Lady Constantia, about Hubert. He is so emphatically the man for the place, and I am so emphatically not! Now isn't it true that he has made a conquest of you, just as he has of them!"

At this she reddened slightly; and to what cause

but one could he ascribe that maidenly signal of distress?

"I certainly do like your brother very much indeed," she returned, with just a shade of defiance in her voice; "everybody does, I think. But you need not grudge him his popularity; he isn't very enviable in any other way that I know of."

"I grudge him nothing," Cyril curtly declared.

Individuals, like nations, can get very near to quarrelling while firmly resolved to keep the peace, and it was just as well that a colloquy which threatened to become subacid was interrupted at this point by Bob Luscombe's powerful voice, calling out:

"Hullo! haven't you set to work to worry the muffins yet? That's all right; then there'll be the more left for us, and I'm jolly hungry, I can tell you!"

Bob, in high good humour and with something of a victor's swagger, was marching along beside Adela, whom he had joined in the stable-yard. Hubert followed at a slower pace with Violet, and perhaps if Cyril could have overheard what passed between the latter couple, he might have felt less like Esau in the presence of Jacob than he did.

"What is the use," Violet was fretfully asking, "of repeating over and over again what I know much better than you do? Did you ever watch a stoat hunting a rabbit? The rabbit is always caught in the end, though it has twice the other's speed."

"That's because the rabbit never believes it can escape," Hubert observed.

"Very likely it is. What then?"

"Well, human beings are supposed to have rather more sense than rabbits, aren't they? I can't think that I should ever submit to be gobbled up against my will."

"You are a man, which makes all the difference. Not that men aren't gobbled up by the dozen every year; only perhaps they don't realise that it happens against their will. However, I'll admit, if you like, that I shall have myself to thank for anything that may happen to me. I am still free, and of course I can't be compelled to part with my freedom."

"Don't, then!—for your own sake, don't!" Hubert adjured her, with great earnestness.

"Oh, it will be for my own sake if I do, certainly not for anybody else's; so you won't need to waste good pity upon me, come what may."

The above fragment of dialogue will serve to show that Hubert had at least not wasted the opportunities afforded to him of cultivating intimate relations with the lady whom his host and friend had described as the future Mrs. Luscombe. Perhaps it also shows that he did not take too punctilious a view of his obligations as a friend and guest; but then if Andromedas are to be rescued, monsters must perforce go to the wall.

CHAPTER XIII.

VIOLET'S MASK.

"I HOPE you enjoyed your afternoon," said Mabel, addressing her cousin, who was seated beside her in the phaeton which she was driving, and who had not spoken once since their departure from Stawell Abbey.

"Yours," returned Violet sardonically, "is a sanguine disposition."

"Anyhow," the other pursued, "Bob appeared to have enjoyed himself."

"He must enjoy being snapped at, then. But, really, I believe he does. I remember his telling me once that the way he brought a dog under control was to tease the poor brute until it flew at him and then administer a sound thrashing."

"I doubt whether he would find that plan succeed, except with curs. Has he been teasing you today?"

"Oh, I'm not his dog yet. For the present I do the teasing and the snapping as well. Probably he thinks that's no reason why he shouldn't use the whip when his turn comes."

"His turn," Mabel asserted, with a greater show of confidence than she felt, "will never come!"

"*Qui vivra verra,*" was the only answer that she obtained.

When Violet was disinclined to be communicative, neither rebukes nor blandishments had the least effect upon her, and her companion, knowing this by experience, desisted after a few minutes from leading remarks which were received in dead silence. Yet it was difficult to be patient with the girl, and still more difficult to make out what she would be at. If she did not mean to marry Bob Luscombe, who behaved as if he had already been accepted, and whose mother openly spoke of the engagement as imminent, why prolong a condition of things which was daily growing more and more fraught with peril to everybody concerned? Hubert Hadlow was visibly concerned, and had been for ten days past—visibly, at least, to all except foolish Mrs. Luscombe and her still more foolish son. If, on the other hand, Violet did mean to succumb in the end to sordid temptations, her conduct to a third person was becoming inexcusable. So, at any rate, it appeared to the straightforward Mabel, who would, nevertheless, have excused it joyfully had she been able to think that it implied what, after all, it might imply.

"I only wish we were well out of all this," she said to her father the same evening. "We are sitting on powder-barrels, and we may be blown up sky-high at any moment."

"Who is going to blow me up, pray?" inquired Mr. Penrose. "If girls don't know their own minds, I can't help it. You don't expect me to forbid Luscombe the house, I suppose?"

"No; only we shall have an explosion, I am afraid. There is one imaginable way out of it," Mabel con-

tinued meditatively. "Not a way of averting the explosion, but a way of saving Violet, which would quite console me for any scorching I might get in consequence. You see, it's pretty certain that Mr. Hubert Hadlow cares for her——"

"The deuce he does! Why, the young scamp hasn't enough to keep himself, let alone an expensive wife!"

"And although one can never be sure of anything with Violet, I suspect that she cares for him. Oh yes, I know it would be out of the question as matters stand, but do let me finish! Mr. Cyril Hadlow was at Stawell this afternoon, and——"

"He's back, is he? And what had he to say for himself?"

"Not much for himself; but he had something to say for his brother, which I have been thinking over since. He has never wished to inherit Kingsmoreton; he feels that, with his tastes and notions, he is a fish out of water there, and he sees, as everybody must, that his brother is simply made for the position. Now, if Sir Martin were to alter his will——"

"Oh, this won't do!—this won't do at all!" interrupted Mr. Penrose, who had silently acquiesced in quite another project, and was not disposed to see it wrecked. "Upon my word, I thought you had more commonsense, Mabel. Personally, I should say that Violet might do a great deal worse than take Bob Luscombe; she's her own mistress, though, and she can please herself. But when it comes to robbing other people for the sake of bringing together a boy and girl, who would be as likely as not to fight

like cat and dog if they were married, I must put my foot down."

"But not on me, I hope," said Mabel, smiling. "I only mentioned this as a possible loophole for Violet; of course I can't take any step towards providing her with it."

"Well, well!" rejoined Mr. Penrose, somewhat reassured; "let us mind our own business, then."

No doubt he thought he was paying proper attention to his when he presently added:

"I should be the last to deny that Cyril Hadlow played the fool when that mischief-making rascal Rigby was here; but I daresay he has seen the error of his ways and, taking him all round, he isn't what I should call a fool."

"Oh, he isn't a fool."

"So that if Sir Martin doesn't consider him disqualified, it's hardly for you to suggest his being cut off."

"As if Sir Martin would listen to any suggestion of mine! The suggestion may come from the person who wants to be cut off, that's all; but it's rather a forlorn hope, I admit."

Mr. Penrose grunted, but refrained from saying what was on the tip of his tongue. He might have something to say later, should Cyril Hadlow coolly present himself in the guise of a disinherited candidate for Mabel's hand; but, in the meantime, his niece had better be left to worry in her own way through complications of her own creating. Being an old man and a sensible one, he knew that intervention in other people's affairs must, if it is to be effective, be

peremptory and backed by authority. He was not prepared to warn Hubert Hadlow off the premises, nor, in the event of his adopting that strong measure, would he be able to prevent Violet from meeting the young fellow elsewhere.

As a matter of fact, Violet met the young fellow every day of her life, Bob never failing to make an appointment for the morrow before he took leave of his destined prey. For the ensuing morning he had arranged that Miss Ord should have her first introduction to otter-hunting, and the two girls found him waiting for them with Hubert when, at the advertised hour of eleven o'clock, they reached the trysting-place. This was an ancient stone bridge, beneath the single arch of which a clear, brown stream brawled downwards through overhanging woods on its course from the moor to the sea. The pack—composed chiefly of foxhounds, for the old otter-hound is fast disappearing—was gathered together in an adjacent meadow, surrounded by a tolerably numerous field, and the blue-coated Master, after glancing at his watch, at once gave the signal for a move.

"Beastly crowd," remarked Bob, eyeing the assemblage with some disfavour; "that's the worst of meeting anywhere within reach of tourists and trippers at this time of year. However, I daresay we shall soon choke 'em off, if we have the luck to find."

It used to be thought great and unmerited luck to find an otter at any hour after the dew was off the grass; but now that more attention is paid to information received and to the exact location of holts, it is no longer indispensable that scent should be fresh. Con-

sequently, the convenience of ladies can be studied by those who wish to study it, and on this occasion the ladies had not long to wait before hounds threw their tongues. A fine dog otter, dislodged from a drain by the terriers, took instantly to the water, and afforded excellent sport for more than an hour both up and down stream, the majority of the field plunging in, every now and again, to form in line and head him back by splashing vigorously with their poles. It was hot work under a blazing sun, and there was some rough scrambling to be done even by spectators who preferred to stick to dry land.

That Violet Ord should choose to be numbered amongst these was not surprising; but it would have been very surprising indeed if so ardent a sportswoman as Mabel had not forsaken her and forgotten all about her in the fever of the chase. Bob Luscombe, too, though holding that otter-hunting was at best but a poor substitute for the pursuit of wild animals on horseback, probably opined that there is a time for everything and that that was not the moment for making love. At any rate, he dashed gallantly, or ungallantly, after the hounds, thus leaving to Hubert a privilege of which his friend was not slow to take advantage.

The wise, of course, are always careful not to abuse their privileges; but wisdom is hardly to be expected of a young man who is in love and who has been encouraged to believe that he may say what he likes. If Violet expected it of her companion she was unreasonable; but then again no wise person expects a woman of any age to be reasonable. As it was, lack of wisdom

on one side and lack of reasonableness on the other introduced an element of discord into the relations of two people who had hitherto been rather dangerously happy together. Possibly Violet, recognising the danger, was more responsible for the discord than Hubert, whose notions of danger were not quite identical with hers. Be that as it may, she would not suffer him to renew warnings and entreaties which, to be sure, did not gain much from reiteration.

"If you only knew how maddening it is to be assured over and over again that two and two make four!" she exclaimed. "I don't remember ever saying that they made five; but if I had, I should stick to the assertion in spite of you. With your permission, or even without it, we'll drop the subject. I didn't come here to argue, I came to see what an otter-hunt was like."

"As far as I can judge," rejoined Hubert a little crossly, "it's a good deal like a rat-hunt; but I don't mind confessing that I didn't come out to see it. I came to see you."

"Well, here I am, and perhaps I should be enjoying the show if you would kindly explain it to me. Why aren't we tearing up and down the bank and mopping our faces, like everybody else?"

"We will if you choose," answered Hubert; "we'll take a flying leap into the river if you choose. Only there doesn't seem to be any particular necessity for that."

Violet, whose costume was not of the workmanlike kind adopted by her cousin, drew the line at wading: but she declared that she was eager to witness every

incident of the run, and as the otter shortly afterwards took to the shore, breath was required for other purposes than that of speech. Scrambling up hill, as fast as their legs would carry them, over slippery boulders, through brambly thickets and across strips of treacherous morass, she and her escort could exchange no more than an occasional word until a check gave them much-needed repose, by which time the exercise had put them both into somewhat better humour.

"Well, what do you think of it?" Hubert asked.

"Exciting, but unbecoming," panted Violet. "Do look at Mabel, with her hat bashed in and her face scarlet! I suppose mine is scarlet too, isn't it? Mr. Luscombe hasn't turned a hair, though. On second thoughts, this sort of thing *is* rather becoming to Mr. Luscombe."

It was by no means unbecoming to her athletic neighbour, who was always in tolerably hard condition; but at him she did not look—had not, indeed, met his eyes once that morning, which was a departure from her usual custom.

"If you want to get up an admiration for Luscombe, now is your time," Hubert rather grudgingly admitted; whereupon she burst out laughing.

He did not join in her hilarity; he did not see what there was to laugh at. He was uneasily suspicious that Violet had divined a secret which he had been at little pains to keep, uneasily afraid that she might be laughing at it and at him. But there was no time to interrogate her; for the hounds had now winded the otter again and were once more in full cry. After that until the kill, which was achieved gloriously in an open

meadow high up on the edge of the moor, Hubert had enough to do in encouraging and assisting the well-nigh exhausted Violet, and of course he was as pleased as she when, in her character of a stranger, she was awarded the mask to which her cousin had a more legitimate claim.

The field had by this time become considerably thinned; but the witnesses of the finish included Sir Martin and Cyril, who had driven up in a dogcart just at the right moment, and the former, relying upon his knowledge of otters and localities, had very thoughtfully brought a luncheon basket with him. He did not, however, stay to partake of its contents with hungry hunters (since his last bereavement Sir Martin had avoided all such gatherings), but departed on foot, saying that the walk home would do him good, and leaving Cyril behind him as his representative.

Now Cyril was not in the mood for adequately representing anybody, least of all himself. He had not been asked to join this otter-hunt; he was certain that his company was not desired by persons who had rather pointedly omitted to mention it to him, and his one wish was to abandon them to their own devices as soon as might be. Naturally, therefore, he gave one of them the impression that he had taken offence, which struck her as somewhat silly and ridiculous of him. She had seated herself on the grass beside Hubert, Violet and Bob having sought the shade of a neighbouring tree, and, looking up at him while he offered her meat and drink, she said, with something less than her usual amiability:

"I am sorry you came upon us just as we were

killing. You thought it a disgusting exhibition, I suppose."

Cyril shrugged his shoulders. "Very kind of you to say you are sorry," he answered, "but of course you mean—and I quite agree with you—that it is I who ought to be sorry that I can't see the fun of slaughtering harmless creatures."

"My dear chap," remonstrated Hubert, "if you owned a trout stream, you wouldn't call otters harmless."

"I am afraid I should, do you know."

"Well then, you wouldn't if you were a trout."

"Perhaps not; only, if I were a trout, I might not think my owner, with his rod and fly, much of a protector. But why distress Miss Penrose by dwelling upon my unsportsmanlike defects? She knows already that I haven't even the poor excuse of being more humane than my neighbours, and that if I don't enjoy taking life, it's only for the same reason that I daresay she would give for disliking to look on at a bull-fight. I wasn't blooded young enough, that's all."

Mabel looked as haughtily displeased as it is possible to look with muddy boots, a dripping skirt, dishevelled hair and a wrecked hat. She was very good-natured, very broad-minded (at least, she hoped so) and quite willing to overlook bygone regrettable eccentricities; but she liked no better than anybody else does to be accused by implication of cruelty and hypocrisy, and of course it was both rude and false to assert that nothing would have shocked her in a bull-fight, except the novel spectacle of gored horses. Moreover, it was taking a little too much for granted to assume that she

could be "distressed" by any particular individual's want of sporting proclivities. All these things being so, she abstained from further notice of Cyril, but was smilingly loquacious with Hubert—which was just what the elder brother had expected of her. She had been similarly engaged the whole morning, no doubt, he reflected, as he turned away.

There was nobody else for him to turn to, save the Master, who, having disposed of a few sandwiches, and being impatient to resume operations, audibly wondered whether the ladies expected hounds to be kept waiting for them all day. It was obvious that he did not care to talk to Cyril, who perceived that his share in the proceedings would be confined to presently collecting dirty plates, knives and forks and driving home with them. He therefore perched himself apart upon a mossy stone, lighted a cigarette and philosophically awaited his release.

This he soon obtained. The hounds moved on, followed by Mabel, Hubert and a diminished field; only Bob Luscombe and Violet remained seated beneath their tree and showed no inclination to rise.

"Miss Ord is dead beat," Bob announced, in answer to Cyril's inquiring gaze; "so I'm going to chuck it and toddle home with her. Oh, *I* don't mind," he added, doubtless feeling that such self-abnegation required accounting for; "we've had one ripping good run, and that's enough for to-day. I'll tell you what you might do, Hadlow; you might drive round by Stawell—it isn't half a mile out of your road—and tell 'em to send a trap down to Mannington for me about five o'clock. Will you, like a good chap? Thanks awfully."

Thus dismissed, Cyril, aided by the groom, meekly packed up the luncheon basket and quitted the scene. He collided with a gate-post on turning into the high-road, and although no damage was done, the groom's subdued groan served him as an additional unneeded reminder of his stark ineptitude. "What doest thou here, Elijah?" he sardonically asked himself, and was fain to reply that he had no reply to make. Was it on that account that he felt so angry and dejected as he jogged along towards Stawell? Scarcely; seeing that Adela had convinced him (who was already convinced) of the cowardice of turning tail in the face of obstacles. Because nobody had seemed to want him or miss him, then? Really he was not so childish. Well, surely not because he was jealous of his younger brother's success with a lady whose affections he had finally decided that he himself had no ambition at all to capture!

Nevertheless, it was that and nothing else, and a dim inkling of the truth deepened his vexation. Good heavens! what earthly difference would it have made if Hubert had been out of the way? And what if Mabel, with her slightly flushed cheeks and disordered hair, had stirred some vagrant chord in his fancy which had not chanced to be touched before? Artistic sensibility is a totally different thing from love.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE INEVITABLE.

WHO has not at one time or another coveted that precious gift of invisibility which figures so largely in old-world fables? Of course neither the writer of these lines nor anybody who reads them would stoop to so despicable an action as eavesdropping; yet occasionally we may all have longed (on purely benevolent grounds and for the general advantage) to play the part of an unseen third for a few minutes, and Cyril would have liked very much to hover near his brother and Mabel Penrose just in order to make quite sure of what he believed to be a fact. Really it was a pity that he could not; for had that power been vouchsafed to him, he would have discovered that the couple in whom he was interested were not making love at all while they trudged in the heat over heathery uplands, but were conversing with that laborious politeness which it is human to display towards those whose society must, through no fault of their own, be endured. What neither could endure with equanimity was the thought that two other persons whom both desired to keep apart—and had, indeed, more or less successfully kept apart for days past—were even now clean beyond reach of help or interference. However, they were just enough to impute no blame to one another and sensible enough

to recognise silently that the inevitable must needs come to pass sooner or later, delayed though it may be by futile strategy.

They did not refer to the subject of their disturbed reflections, nor had Hubert the face to suggest that they should abandon a chase which seemed to hold out faint prospects of reward. He only ventured to remark, after a time, that this was rather weary work, and to add:

"I suppose you don't often find an otter in the afternoon, do you?"

"Oh, sometimes," answered Mabel resignedly; "there are quite half-a-dozen pools higher up to be tried yet. Are you tired of it?"

He certainly was, and so was she; but a sort of shamed feeling that they ought to persevere, and that, even should they desist, it would be a little ridiculous now to rush helter-skelter down to Mannington, stood in the way of a mutual avowal. So on they plodded, and never an otter nor trail of one did they strike until the sun began to slope towards the west, and the Master, an invincible optimist, had to acknowledge that there was no more to be done that day.

"Sorry you have had such a long tramp for nothing, Miss Penrose," said he cheerily; "I hoped we should have been able to show you some sport this afternoon, but one never knows. Your cousin was the wise one, after all."

Mabel had her doubts about that; but in truth one never knows, and to bring Violet to bay had proved too tough a job for Bob Luscombe on more than one previous occasion.

"Are you coming back to tea with us?" she asked her companion, when at length they had set their faces homewards.

"If I may, and if it won't be too late," he answered.

"Oh, it won't be too late; I was only wondering whether the others would be there or at Stawell."

"I don't suppose it makes much odds, does it?" was Hubert's gloomy and somewhat inconsequent rejoinder.

She gave him a sidelong glance, accompanied by a rueful little smile. They understood one another well enough, though there had been no discussion between them of topics which were best left alone, and Hubert was quite aware that Miss Penrose, dreading an alliance between Bob and her cousin, had found him a helpful ally. He thought also, and was right in thinking, that he had her sympathy and pity. More than that he could not expect, inasmuch as no pauper could save Violet from her threatened fate by the heroic expedient of marrying her.

After a rather long interval of silence, Mabel said suddenly, "I would give a good deal to know what Violet really means!"

"So would I," returned Hubert.

"Well, but don't you? I fancy she tells you more than she does me."

Hubert shook his head and laughed unmirthfully. "Oh, I don't think so. In a sort of way she tells everybody everything; she makes no secret of what she wants —and what she doesn't want. But she has never told

me what she means to do, and I shouldn't wonder if she herself didn't know."

"But it's impossible for her to go on much longer like that!"

"Well, I should think it might be a bit difficult; but she's jolly clever, you know. At all events, she'll end by doing whatever it is that she wants to do, I expect."

At this Mabel frowned. "You speak as if you didn't care what became of her," she remonstrated.

"Oh, I care, if that's any use. Only you know as well as I do, Miss Penrose, that it can't be."

It might be; but she did not push indiscretion so far as to point out how it might. Desirable as an exchange of parts between the brothers was in the abstract, it was hardly for an outsider to indicate that facile solution of several problems. Consequently, all Mabel said was:

"There are people who can marry for money and never repent of their bargain. The misfortune is that Violet isn't one of that sort."

"Perhaps she is one of the sort who always repent of any bargain," Hubert suggested, with quite unexpected acuteness.

He received no reassuring contradiction, and as at this point the path down the narrow valley dwindled to a track along which two pedestrians could not walk abreast, Mabel brushed on ahead through the undergrowth, while conversation became intermittent and monosyllabic. It was nearly six o'clock when the pair, scrambling down a bank to reach the direct road to Mannington, were within an ace of being run over by a

high gig, the occupant of which pulled up and gave vent to a joyous view halloa.

"Nicked you off neatly!" Bob Luscombe cried. "Well, what sport? None, eh? I thought as much. Never mind; better luck next time! Jump up, old man, and you shall have a lift home. That is, unless Miss Penrose would like me to drive her back to Mannington."

Miss Penrose, having expressed a preference for walking, was not urged to think better of it. Bob did not desire her company just then, whereas he was eager for that of his friend, to whom, almost before they were out of earshot, he imparted a great and glorious piece of news.

"You may congratulate me, Hadlow; the deed's done!"

He was so radiant, so brimming over with joy and triumph, that Hubert's sickly grin and murmured response of "Oh, it's done, is it?" satisfied him quite as well as the slap on the back which he had anticipated.

"Now I daresay you think it was all plain sailing," he continued; "but I tell you it wasn't. Not by any manner of means! Jove! what rum creatures women are! Mind you, I expect she meant to give in all along—what?"

"Very likely."

"You bet she did! But she had me down on all fours, promising Lord knows what, before she'd say Yes. Well, she's worth it. She's worth anything!"

Gazing with rapt eyes into vacancy, this very

ordinary and coarse young man was transfigured into something akin to nobility of aspect by the divine passion which held him in grip and which fortunately rendered him independent of any encouragement on the part of his neighbour, who really could not at that particular juncture manage to think that Miss Ord was worth much.

"A London house?" Bob went on presently. "Well, why shouldn't she have one if she wants it? I can afford it all right, and though I don't care about London myself for more than a week at a time, there isn't such an awful lot to be done in the country after April, when you come to think of it."

"Was that the only condition she made?" Hubert inquired, after clearing his voice.

The other laughed aloud. "Rather not! But, dash it all! she shall have whatever she asks for, and welcome. As I always say, women are like mares, and if you think you can treat a mare the same as you would a horse, you're jolly well mistaken. They've got to be humoured or you'll do no good with 'em."

"I suppose they have."

"You may take my word for that; and I've had more experience than most men."

"Of women?"

"No, of mares; but it's the same thing. Well, I'm not going to have matters all my own way at starting, that's quite clear; but why the deuce should I? I've got what I had set my heart upon—I generally do manage to get the things I set my heart upon—and now it's her turn. Between ourselves, I mean to be

master; but she won't find me a hard one, or a stingy one, bless her!"

Further examples of the happy conqueror's self-glorification may be omitted. How much poor Hubert enjoyed listening to him will be readily understood by such readers as may have had the misfortune to adore a lady quite out of their reach, and still more readily by those who have been forced to withdraw from that lady the forlorn homage of their respect.

Now it is utterly impossible to respect any young woman who, for the sake of a house in London, carriages, frocks and jewels, consents to become the wife of a man whom she does not even like, much less love; and this was what the indignant Mabel told her cousin in so many words, on receiving the information which awaited her return. But Violet boldly declared, in reply, that she had no regrets.

"When one is bound to jump over a fence it's absurd to keep on refusing. May be dangerous too, as you ought to know."

"You weren't bound to jump, Vi," said Mabel sorrowfully.

"Yes, I was; and now that the fence is behind me, I shall be all right. He's tremendously fond of me, you see; he's ready to give me all I ask for and do anything I tell him to do."

"He won't be a year or two hence. Besides, if he were, that would never be enough to make you happy."

"Oh, bother happiness! I don't think I believe much in happiness. What I do believe in, and what

I am going to have, is peace and comfort and, above all, freedom."

"Do you really suppose that Bob Luscombe's wife will be free?"

"Well, I shall be free from Ida, at all events. Do you call that nothing?"

"I can understand its meaning a good deal; but I can't understand——"

"No, my dear Mabel, you can't," interrupted Violet impatiently; "so why try? I can tell you this for your comfort; I know perfectly well what I am about; I haven't made up my mind in a hurry, and I have reasons of which even you would approve if you heard them."

"I am certain I shouldn't," Mabel protested, with conviction.

"Then we needn't go into them. I am sorry that you should be shocked and pained and all the rest of it; but there's no help for that, and as my marriage is now quite unalterably decided upon, the time for remonstrances has gone by. Won't you, please, be nice about it, Mabel, and congratulate me, as everybody else will?"

"I am such a poor hand at making believe! I don't know that everybody else will congratulate you either."

"All the more reason why you shouldn't join a captious minority. Now the question is, shall the wedding take place from this house or from Pont Street? Bob says a quiet little rural ceremony would meet his views best; but I have a vulgar hankering after St. Paul's, Knightsbridge, with a full choral service

and lots of bridesmaids and flowers and palms and things."

While Mabel was rather unsuccessfully striving to stimulate an interest in details which made her feel ill, Cyril, seated on the balustrade of the terrace at Kingsmoreton Court, was giving a description of her behaviour at the otter-hunt to the always interested, always diverted Adela.

"It's a pity," he was saying, "that you weren't there to see for yourself how Hubert has forged ahead and how completely my nose has been put out of joint. I can't pretend to deplore it, you know; if the thing comes off, it will be a splendid stroke of luck for Hubert from every point of view, and though you would have it that I was a serious competitor, I never was in reality."

"Quite sure of that?" Adela inquired, with her head slightly inclined to one side and the customary faint smile flickering about her lips.

"Absolutely sure. Well, I won't say that I didn't at one time—just for a short time—wonder whether you weren't all of you right; the necessity of marrying somebody looked rather like one of the necessities that I had accepted, and of course she deserves all you ever said in her praise. But if there is one thing more certain than that I couldn't screw up my courage to the point of offering myself to Miss Penrose, it is that she would refuse me if I did."

"Ah, how the green-eyed monster peeps out!"

"Upon my honour, I'm not jealous," asseverated Cyril, who would not have said that unless he had be-

lieved himself to be speaking the truth: "the only thing I lament is that I suppose I shall now have to seek some other more or less suitable bride. Which is rather a nuisance."

"And Mabel would have suited so admirably!"

"Because we shall some day own adjacent properties, do you mean? With the result that, if we married, one house or the other would have to stand empty. Is that such a strong recommendation? You are much too clear-sighted to imagine that there could be any other. My general attitude towards existence is so totally at variance with Miss Penrose's that I don't believe she even begins to understand what it is."

"Oh, if you insist upon being understood——!"

"It doesn't seem a very extravagant demand to make. Surely I'm simple enough!"

"You're as simple as the alphabet and a great deal simpler than the multiplication table. For all that, I'm afraid you'll always need explaining to women."

"Not to you, anyhow; you have read me like a book from the first. I suppose that proves you to be no ordinary woman."

"No," she answered, with the low, leisurely laugh which was in itself a sign of comprehension and which had become grateful to his ears, "I think it only proves that you carried my heart by assault the very first day we met."

The serene calm with which this announcement was made deprived it of embarrassing suggestion; yet it gave its hearer something to think about. He made

some semi-jocular rejoinder, and Adela resumed meditatively:

"That is the sort of effect that you want to produce upon the beloved object. Then she'll understand all that there's any occasion for her to understand."

"Possibly. The trouble is that I haven't a beloved object."

Adela shrugged her shoulders. "I begin to believe you. Apparently you weren't quite as easy to read as a book after all, for I really thought you were smitten with Mabel right enough. Well, if she won't do, she won't, and we must try, as you say, to discover a substitute for her."

To find a substitute for Mabel! He could not but ask himself whether a substitute was far to seek. It is a well-ascertained phenomenon in human nature that a man who has just been crossed in love—and although Cyril did not know it, he was in that condition—is peculiarly sensible to fresh feminine allurements, and Adela was at that moment distinctly alluring.

"I have no eye for clothes," he irrelevantly remarked, "but yours always seem to me to be the work of an expert. Do they come from Paris?"

Adela stroked her white serge skirt complacently. "Isn't it rather neat? Built after my own design by my own humble little personal attendant at an outlay of about ten pounds. Paris indeed!—not for poor out-at-elbows me at the close of a horribly costly London season! Why, what do you suppose my blighted prospects have left me to live upon?"

He had not the least idea, nor did she tell him; for

now a tall, black figure loomed up between the end of the terrace and the reddened western sky, at sight of which she sprang to her feet.

"Oh, here comes Constantia!" she exclaimed; "I'm off!" And in an instant she had vanished.

Lady Constantia advanced, with slow, deliberate steps, until she came to a standstill in front of Cyril, who wondered to what he owed so unprecedented a mark of attention. No explanation of it, however, was vouchsafed to him, and he was compelled, as usual, to be the first to open fire. This he did by inquiring whether Sir Martin had come in yet; a somewhat absurd question to put, considering that it was close upon seven o'clock.

"Hours ago," answered Lady Constantia, staring at the inquirer for a second and then averting her woebegone eyes. "He is rather tired. It is not good for him to walk such long distances."

"I wanted him to drive back," Cyril pleaded, in deprecation of the implied reproof, "but he wouldn't. He didn't care about lunching with the otter-hunters, and somebody had to wait for the basket."

Lady Constantia's gaze was fixed upon a flight of noisy, manœuvring rooks. She made no rejoinder, but remarked abruptly, after a moment, "Your brother is a nice sort of boy."

"As good a fellow as ever breathed," Cyril loyally affirmed; "I am so glad that you have all taken to him."

"I hope," Lady Constantia went on, still contemplating the rooks, "there is not going to be any foolishness between him and Miss Violet Ord. I don't

know the girl; she may not be as worthless as her sister, and I trust she is not; but I think your brother should be cautioned that she will never be allowed to engage herself to him. A word spoken in season may spare him unhappiness."

"He has nothing to fear from Miss Ord," answered Cyril, somewhat amused; "I am not quite so sure about Miss Penrose. Would she be allowed to engage herself to him?"

Lady Constantia wheeled round upon her neighbour with a swift frown. "Mabel!" she ejaculated. And then—"Oh, I see!"

What did she see? Her eyes were once more scanning the far horizon, and her next remark did not appear to have any direct bearing upon the subject under discussion.

"You have made great friends with Adela," she said. "That is as you please; it is your affair. But you had better not believe everything that she tells you."

"She has never told me anything but the truth yet," Cyril returned.

"It is not true that your brother is paying attention to Mabel Penrose."

"I think it is; but I only say so because of what I have noticed myself. Mrs. Spencer did not suggest the idea to me."

Lady Constantia emitted an indescribable little sound, which may have been indicative of incredulity or displeasure, but which was not followed by any articulate comment. Quite a long time elapsed before she resumed, speaking in short, jerky sentences which

had the effect of being forced out of her almost against her will:

"Adela is not straightforward. Everything she says or hints must be accepted with reservations. She is never without a motive. I make it a rule to say nothing behind people's backs that I would not say to their faces, and you can repeat my words to her if you choose. Probably you will."

"I shall certainly do nothing of the sort," replied Cyril, with some warmth; "I am not a mischief-maker. But I think you are prejudiced and rather unjust."

Lady Constantia did not look angry. "I am prejudiced," she briefly acknowledged. "Nevertheless, you will remember what I have said, and it will be good for you to remember it."

With that she turned and marched slowly away, leaving Cyril a good deal surprised. If Lady Constantia was unjust, he flattered himself that he was not, and he acquitted her of the desire to make mischief which he had disclaimed on his own score. But of course there was no more necessity to warn him against the good-natured Adela than there was to set Hubert on his guard against Violet Ord.

CHAPTER XV.

THE EBB TIDE.

To weep and wail aloud over a wounded heart and dispelled illusions is the privilege of poets, some of whom have risen to fame by availing themselves thereof and have, it may be hoped, obtained solace thereby; but the first instinct of the average prosaic man, and more particularly of the average Englishman, is to suffer in silence. Two things helped Hubert Hadlow, who was suffering rather acutely, to put a good face on what had happened to him: firstly, he had known all along that his love for Violet Ord was an altogether hopeless passion, and secondly, although he worshipped her, he could not help despising her. The truth was that she had not treated him well, and when he remembered how she had craved counsel of him, claimed his compassion and in a hundred ways fanned a flame which she could not but be conscious of having kindled, he felt his ears grow hot. What he said to himself was that he could excuse a girl in Violet's situation for accepting such an offer as had been made to her, but that he could not stand humbug and hypocrisy; perhaps what he meant was that he did not enjoy being fooled. Be that as it may, he dismissed the impulse to pack his portmanteau forthwith and join his mother and his

sisters in the Isle of Wight. Luscombe expected him to spend at least another month at Stawell, and he was not going to gratify or amuse or surprise anybody by a precipitate retreat.

On the following day, therefore, he drove over to Mannington with his friend to proffer cheerful congratulations which were as cheerfully received, and if anything had been required to convince him that good pity would be wasted upon Miss Violet, that want would have been supplied by the young lady's demeanour, which breathed a contentment so complete as to border upon jubilation. Then and for many subsequent days Violet's high spirits rendered her at once the best of company and the most unapproachable of companions. She was gay and charming with the delighted Bob (though adroit in evading occasions of being left alone with him), pleasantly loquacious with Hubert, amiable with everybody. Even Mabel was baffled, and sometimes wondered whether her cousin had either a heart or a soul. However, she was in no doubt as to Hubert's possession of the former organ or as to its lacerated condition. She thought the boy was behaving wonderfully well—as indeed he was; she blamed herself a little for having, with the best intentions, acted in some sort as Violet's accomplice; she divined the anger and mortification which he was at such pains to hide, and longed to make some amends to him. But it was not very easy to see how that could be done.

In some degree it was accomplished by means of a tacit and tactful sympathy which Hubert was quick to appreciate. In those days he conceived a great and

grateful affection for Mabel Penrose, he learned to look forward to his frequent meetings with her as to an unfailing anodyne, and soon understood all the kind consoling things which she knew better than to say. Small wonder was it that his brother, seeing these two constantly together, and noting their mutual comprehension, smiled the superior smile of the intelligent.

"Rot!" retorted Hubert one day, in acknowledgment of some fraternal banter which struck him as anything but intelligent; but of course that artless disclaimer was accepted for what it appeared to be worth.

Had it not been for a series of trivial accidents which led him thither, Cyril would have given Mannington a wide berth at this time. There is nothing particularly attractive in the part of odd man out, nor does anybody wish to thrust his society upon lovers, whether acknowledged as such or not. Furthermore, Mabel was no longer the frank friend to him that she had once been. Friendly, as far as words went, she remained; but something undefinable, yet plainly perceptible, had come between him and her, so that they could not feel at ease together; and this was a pity, seeing that he asked for nothing better than to be friends with his future sister-in-law.

"Oh, but that's just it," laughed Adela, to whom he innocently formulated the above complaint. "How can you be so faithless as to ask for nothing better and then expect to be thanked for your moderation!"

Adela persisted in calling him faithless, persisted in deploring his perversity.

"I almost despair of ever finding a mate for you,"

she sighed; "you're so exacting. I begin to see that your wife must be exempt from any opinions or convictions of her own."

"Not if she will allow me to keep mine."

"How can she, poor thing, if she has the affection for you that you'll insist upon?"

"You are good enough to say that you have some affection for me; yet you don't object to my beliefs and disbeliefs."

"Ah, but I'm rare! You don't know how rare I am."

He knew, at any rate, that she was the most equable, tolerant woman he had ever met, and it may be that circumstances just then moved him towards a somewhat exaggerated appreciation of those two qualities. The best women, he thought, are rather apt to be intolerant. Very likely Lady Constantia, with her fierce aversion to her daughter-in-law, and Mabel Penrose, with her orthodox conventionality, were Adela's moral superiors, but as neither of them could make the sort of appeal to him that she could, he disregarded the warnings of the one and tried hard to forget how pretty the other was.

"If I were struggling in the water a quarter of a mile from land, what would you do?" Adela inquired of him one evening.

"Pull you out, I suppose," he answered.

"Well, but could you? I ask because I am not in the least tired of life yet, and because I am sure neither Bob Luscombe nor your brother would bestow a thought upon me if we were swamped."

"Are you thinking of going out in a boat with them then?"

She nodded. "So are you. I had a note just now from Mabel, who wants us to accompany them down the river to-morrow on the ebb tide."

"In what kind of a boat?"

"In what she calls a tub. Dangerously frail, no doubt, but said to be safe by comparison with the outrigger in which Bob and your brother propose to scull. Now the question is, are you a really strong swimmer?"

"No; but I think I might undertake to save one lady if she didn't throttle me. How about the others, though? It sounds as if I was to be placed in sole charge of three."

"The scullers must look after them. I don't enter that tub unless it is clearly understood that, in case of an accident, you are to seize my hair and mine only. It grows on my head, so you can clutch it without hesitation."

"What I will promise without any hesitation," returned Cyril, laughing, "is that you shall not be swamped."

"Not by you, perhaps; but how can you tell that Violet won't begin to jump about and upset us? Now am I to have the first call upon your services or am I not?"

Cyril gave the demanded pledge, being tolerably confident that he would not have to redeem it. He was far from feeling equally confident that either he or his three companions would enjoy the projected excursion, which indeed did not seem to have been very happily conceived.

It had, as a matter of fact, been conceived by Violet

—ever fertile in expedients for ridding herself of the proximity of her betrothed. Having heard that the two young men sometimes went out for spins in the racing boat which Bob kept on the river a short distance higher up than Kingsmoreton, nothing would satisfy her but to witness one of their performances, and when she was told that Bob also owned a roomy gig, the remainder of the programme settled itself. So, at least, she said; but in truth it was she who settled everything at that time, her lover counting it a joy to yield to her, even when her behests were not wholly to his liking. On this occasion, for the rest, he had a mental reservation, which he did not divulge until Hubert and he had lowered themselves into the outrigger, which an attendant boatman was holding alongside of the raft for them.

"Now, Vi," he announced, "you're going to get in and steer for us."

"You think so, do you?" she returned. "That's where you make a little mistake."

"Oh, come on!" Bob urged. "It's all right—ever so much jollier than waddling along in that old barge. You'll have to sit still, that's all, and keep her under the land."

Now Violet, who was not without experience of boating on the Thames, was quite capable of taking the lines, and perhaps the exhilarating prospect of being sculled down stream by a pair of athletes may have attracted her, for she seemed to vacillate.

"Well, not if you stroke, anyhow," she said at length, after further entreaties from Bob. "You would

draw off my attention all the time, and we should run into something as sure as fate."

The accommodating Bob disembarked instantly. "Right you are! I'll go to bow."

"No; I can't have you in the boat at all; yours is such a distracting personality. Mr. Cyril Hadlow must take your place."

Mr. Cyril Hadlow, who had just driven up to the landing-stage with Adela, declined this privilege very decisively as soon as it was offered to him. He had never done any double sculling or sat on a sliding seat in his life, he said. "Besides which," he added, with a glance at Bob's zephyr and shorts, "I'm not dressed for the part."

"Of course you aren't," Bob agreed. "Dash it, Vi, you can't ask a man to scull in trousers!"

Violet proved that she could by peremptorily doing so, and an altercation, half jocose, half indignant, ensued, in which everybody except Hubert took a share. The latter, in compliance with a sign from Violet, who had stepped nimbly into the boat unassisted, shoved off a little from the raft, with the result that an ever-widening gap of water separated that wilful young lady from her expostulating friends on the bank. Presently, with an abruptness which took Hubert by surprise—

"Come forward!" she cried. "Are you ready?—paddle!"

Mechanically he obeyed orders; the boat shot out into the stream, and Violet looking triumphantly over her shoulder shouted, "Now we're off! Catch us if you can!"

Had the whole thing been premeditated? No doubt that question presented itself to each of the deserted ones on the raft; but of course they did not put it into words, and Mabel, who was scanning Bob's astonished countenance with some apprehension, had the relief of seeing it slowly overspread by a broad grin. In Bob's eyes his affianced bride could no longer do wrong. He contemplated her pranks with the amused indulgence which some parents display towards their ill-behaved offspring, and had the air of inviting all and sundry to join him in treating them as an excellent joke.

"Serves me right for letting her give me the slip!" he remarked. "Well, it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good, and you ladies will move along a bit faster now than you'd have done without me, that's one thing."

The gig, propelled by his powerful strokes, which Cyril, taking the bow oar, did his best to imitate, was soon clearing the water at a very respectable rate of speed; but to overtake the fugitives, who maintained an easy lead, was out of the question, nor in any case could a transhipment have been effected without risks which Adela, for one, did not mean to incur.

"Mr. Luscombe," said she, "you are the victim of a heartless outrage, and you have my full leave to inflict any sort of punishment you like upon that youth the moment you get him on dry land again; but as long as I remain afloat, with only a thin plank between me and the world to come, there must be no larks, please."

Bob assured her that she had nothing to fear. "They can't get further than Chapel Point," said he. "Then we'll head 'em off and see how they like being hustled back up stream."

The promontory to which he alluded formed the western horn of the landlocked estuary on which Kingsmoreton stands. Beyond it was the open sea, unruffled now beneath a cloudless sky, but scarcely fitted at any time for such fragile craft as a river-built pair-oar.

"Just over two miles from the raft," Bob remarked. "We shall be there in ten minutes, with the tide running like this. Take her across under the shore, Miss Penrose; you'll find her steer easier that way."

It is not altogether easy to keep a boat's head straight when a swift following current is playing tricks with her and when stroke is pulling bow round all the time; so Mabel had enough to do in attending to her business while Adela, leaning forward, elbows on knees, chatted pleasantly to Bob. She and he always got on well together; but with what man did Adela ever fail to get on? Cyril, studying the two women, while the wooded heights on the near side of the river and the huddled houses and shipping of Kingsmoreton on the farther slipped past him, drew reluctant, unavoidable comparisons. He could understand that Mabel might be made vexed and uneasy by her cousin's escapade, though it did not seem likely to have any serious consequences; but why must she needs look so? Why suggest jealous suspicions, for which she must be well aware that there was no ground, to a lover who obviously entertained none?

Was it not rather stupid of her to sit silent there, with compressed lips and a frowning brow, and gaze after the rapidly vanishing outrigger? Adela, wiser and more considerate, was exerting herself to do the one thing that could be done by keeping a man of uncertain temper amused.

He would not have been so unjust, had he known that Mabel saw a danger which she was powerless to avert, of which Adela was completely ignorant and of which Bob had not taken note. The latter, however, became suddenly alive to it when he looked over his shoulder and, shading his eyes with his hand, caught sight of sculls dipping in a dazzle of sunlit water far ahead.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed excitedly, "what an idiot that chap is! He may just manage it yet, though. No, he won't! Ah, I thought as much—there they go!" He brought his open hand down upon his knee with a resounding slap. "Well, they've done for themselves this journey and no mistake!"

"What have they done?" asked Adela, in alarm. "You don't mean that they have had an upset!"

"No; but they've got right into the tideway and got swept round the point. Oh, they're safe enough; they'll find themselves in smooth water at once, and there's a cove the other side where they can lie quite snug. But the mischief is that they can't get back. I defy any man on earth to pull a boat round Chapel Point against tide and stream; so there they must stay for the next three hours."

"Mightn't they land?" Adela asked.

"What, leave the boat on the beach and walk

across to us? Yes, they might do that; only they would have to tramp a longish way round. The cliffs on the sea side are pretty nearly perpendicular, you see."

"They aren't at all likely to attempt it," said Mabel rather drily.

Bob agreed that they were not, adding that he could see nothing for it but to follow them and share their compulsory detention. "When all's said and done, we might as well be there as anywhere else, and it will be rather jolly sculling back in the cool of the evening. The tide turns a little before eight o'clock, I think."

Adela was very sorry to appear unsociable, but really dared not incur her mother-in-law's quenchless ire by remaining away until so late an hour. "If we don't put in an appearance by dinner-time," she declared, "it will certainly be concluded that some catastrophe has happened, and then there will be a hue and cry, and Sir Martin will have one of his heart attacks—and, in short, the fat will be in the fire. I am afraid I must be a nuisance and ask you to take me back."

The request was so reasonable that Bob could not but accede to it, though he began at length to look somewhat glum. He brightened up, however, when Mabel suggested, by way of a compromise, that they should cross the estuary to Kingsmoreton, whence Adela and Cyril might return home on foot, and, after some further parley, this solution was adopted. The transit was not rapid, as a circuitous course had to be shaped in order to avoid the full strength of

the outflowing current; but once more Adela won Cyril's admiration by the vivacity with which she beguiled the way, while once more he felt irritated against Mabel, who scarcely opened her lips and took no pains to conceal the fact that she was troubled and depressed.

"Don't you think," he asked his companion, after she and he had been landed at the harbour steps and were ascending the steep, narrow streets of Kingsmoreton, "that Miss Penrose is rather unnecessarily alarmed? I don't suppose her cousin contemplates an elopement, and I am sure Hubert doesn't."

"Oh, nobody elopes nowadays," answered Adela; "that's a very out-of-date proceeding. Poaching flourishes, though, and if I were Bob Luscombe, I don't know that I should be inclined to trust Violet Ord much farther than I could see her. Perhaps Mabel thinks that your brother also is safer under her eye than out of sight."

"Then all I can say is her eyes must serve her to very little purpose when she has him under observation."

"Love is blind," remarked Adela sententiously.

"So you admit at last that they are in love with one another?"

"I'll make any admission you please if you will only stop looking so cross. You give me a sort of feeling as if I were to blame for your disappointment or disenchantment or whatever it is. Yet goodness knows I used my best endeavours to bring you and Mabel together."

"I know you did," Cyril owned, with prompt com-

punction, "and if I had any quarrel with you, it would only be on account of your obstinate refusal to believe that I am neither disappointed nor disenchanted. But nothing, you may be sure, will provoke me into quarrelling with my best friend."

Adela brought a smiling, whimsical side-glance to bear upon him. "Do you know," said she, "I really believe I *am* about the best friend you have."

"I haven't a doubt of it," he answered.

After this they mounted the hill in almost uninterrupted silence. It was not until they had left the town behind them and had entered a deep, shady lane that Cyril recurred to a dropped subject by saying:

"Nobody could have been a better friend to me than you have been all through. I must have tried your patience often, but you have never lost it with me; you have kept my spirits up when I have been more than half sick of the whole difficult business; you have always been ready and anxious to lend me a helping hand, and I can't think why!"

"Oh, I told you why the other day," was Adela's quiet reply.

He remembered very well what she had told him; but now—perhaps because his mood had changed—her words, lightly enough spoken, seemed to him to bear a much more serious significance than he had allowed to them at the moment. Did she not always speak lightly? It was a matter of temperament with her; she was no more given to sentimentality than he was; and it pleased her to talk as though she was a shallow and selfish woman. But her actions were not selfish. Dutiful and affectionate with Sir Martin, who

was not fond of her; invincibly patient with Lady Constantia, who detested her; good-humoured with all the world, and ever on the look-out to render small services to those who generally omitted to thank her for them—surely the real Adela was a very different person from the superficial Adela, whose popularity was of a purely social nature, and whom her mother-in-law had so unfairly charged with duplicity.

But did all this constitute a sufficient reason for asking her to be his wife? Well, it may at least be asserted with truth that many a man has made surrender of his liberty for worse ones. Moreover, there was another reason; the reason which she had given him; a reason which, owing to causes which he did not investigate, struck him as peculiarly cogent just then.

It was all over within the space of a few seconds. Somehow there did not seem to be anything either for him or for her to explain; it was as if they had known all along what must be the outcome of a friendship which had only gone by that designation for want of a more accurate one. A quarter of an hour later Cyril, sauntering along the shrubberies towards Kingsmoreton Court, with his *fiancée's* hand tucked under his arm, proclaimed himself perfectly happy, while she, for her part, made a similar avowal—adding, however, by way of qualification:

"All the same, I sha'n't be sorry when we have broken this to the old people."

"Do you think they will be displeased?" asked Cyril innocently.

"My dear," answered Adela, "they'll simply flay us alive!"

CHAPTER XVI.

VAIN AVOWALS.

"I DON'T want to brag," said Violet modestly, after Hubert had sculled some three hundred yards down the river in silence, "but I think I worked that rather well, don't you?"

She got no commendation from the partner of her flight, who was in some doubt as to what object she had had in view, and consequently could not pronounce upon the skill displayed in its execution.

"What do you want me to do now, please?" he asked, in a tone which seemed to imply that, although he was ready to obey orders, he did not mistake those which he had already received for a personal compliment.

"Oh, just paddle along to wherever you and Bob meant to go. Don't let the others catch us up, that's all."

She leant back, opened a sunshade, and said, "Now let's enjoy ourselves."

Little prospect of enjoying himself could Hubert discern, and little gratitude did he feel to Miss Ord for having placed him in an equivocal position. She had made a fool of him to her heart's content and to his heart's grievous hurt: was not that enough for her? If she expected through this freak to derive further amusement from the complaints of a lovelorn

dupe, she should be disappointed. He had neither complaints to make nor curiosity to be allayed; nothing was more easy of explanation than her conduct in accepting Bob Luscombe's hand, and nothing concerned him less. He had not shown, and did not intend to show, that he despised her for it; but neither did he mean to be enticed into any repetition of the half-avowals which he would have done better to repress in an earlier stage of their acquaintanceship.

It followed from this highly correct attitude on his part that there was not a great deal to talk about while the boat glided rapidly on her course towards the river's mouth; but Violet did not seem to be at all damped by the grim and prim replies which her leading remarks evoked. She was doubtless prepared for self-defence, and she gave him an opening for attack; but, since he did not take advantage of this, she shifted her ground and began to ply him with questions relating to his own future. What was he going to be? Something in the City, wasn't it? Wouldn't he rather hate that sort of life? Would it bring in a lot of money some day? How about holidays in the meantime? Any chance of keeping up cricket or getting an occasional spell of hunting and shooting?

He answered concisely that the relative who had been so kind as to place a high stool at his disposal might possibly take him into partnership after many years, though that, as far as he knew, was not likely to entail great wealth; that he would certainly hate the life, but that beggars cannot be choosers; that of course he would not be able to afford either hunting or shooting, and that if he were granted a week's vacation at

Christmas and a month in the summer, he supposed he would be lucky.

The girl under the sunshade (alas! how girlish, how irresponsible and pardonable she looked, as she reclined there, with the rudder-lines slipping through her careless fingers!) sighed and observed pensively that it didn't sound all roses. "But they're bound to let you go for a month or two in summer," she added, in a more cheerful tone, "and then you must come down here and stay with us."

"Thank you very much," answered Hubert, who thought she might have spared him that stab.

Stay with Mr. and Mrs. Bob Luscombe! The bare suggestion sent a shiver all through him. What is the use of pretending to despise, or even truly despising, a person whom you love with your whole heart and soul? It makes no difference; nothing makes any difference, unless, perhaps, long efflux of time, and naturally the lad did not wish to think that that would make a difference either. The desultory conversation was kept up, though without much assistance from him; he began to find self-control harder; every now and then he was assailed by a wild impulse to exclaim, "Oh, drop it! You know I worship you; you know I long for nothing so much as to get away from you! If you are satisfied with your bargain, then it's all right; but why talk as if we could ever be friends again? Why affect to think that I have forgotten all that I have heard from your own lips?"

No wonder this inward tumult prevented him from noticing a tiny external tumult, in the form of hurrying wavelets, to which he should have been paying at-

tention. It was Violet who revealed his heedlessness to him by blandly inquiring:

"Are we bound for Cherbourg? Because we shall be at sea in about a minute."

There was no question as to that, nor was there any time to be lost. Indeed, it soon became apparent that the time already lost could not be redeemed. With a few powerful strokes Hubert brought the boat's head round; but the only result was that the current, catching her broadside, carried her the more quickly into the miniature race off Chapel Point, and once in that broken water nothing remained to be done but to shoot ahead with it until it broadened and dispersed in the blue expanse outside.

"Thank the Lord, there's no breeze!" muttered Hubert under his breath. And then aloud: "I'm afraid we're in rather a hole, Miss Ord. I ought to have been hugging the shore all this time; but, instead of that, I've let the tide have its way with us, and—here we are! I'm awfully sorry."

"You needn't be," answered Violet; "I rather like myself out here. The sea is as smooth as a duckpond, and we can get back to the shelter of the river at any moment."

He had to explain that that was just what they would be unable to accomplish before the turn of the tide. At first she treated the situation as a huge joke; but the further announcement that they had cut themselves off from their friends for a matter of three hours sobered her considerably. This was a good deal more than she had bargained for. The corners of her mouth drooped piteously, her eyes grew large and round, and

Hubert's protestations that there was no sort of danger failed to comfort her.

"That depends upon what you call danger," she somewhat fretfully returned. "Of course we are not going to be drowned, but I don't know that I shall not be made to wish I had been." Then, on a sudden, with the face and gesture of a naughty child: "Sometimes I'm afraid of him!" she whispered.

The appeal went straight to a heart which had been vainly endeavouring to harden itself. No doubt the poor girl was afraid of her coarse, choleric lover; no doubt she had also been afraid of other people and things, and had yielded to a combination too formidable to be defied. If only it had been possible to throw protecting arms round her and soothe her with promises that nobody should ever frighten her again! But that being out of the question, Hubert did what he could by accepting sole responsibility for the mishap which had occurred and professing rather more confidence than he felt in his friend's reasonableness. He added that their movements, which must have been observed from the boat astern, had probably occasioned no surprise.

"Luscombe and I had a narrow squeak of being caught in the same way yesterday; it's the sort of thing that might happen to anybody who wasn't keeping a sharp look-out, and the only misfortune is that they can't follow us without shutting the door behind them, just as we have done. But I'll tell you what I'll do if you like; we'll run the boat ashore, and then I'll scramble up over the cliffs somehow or other and report that you're all right."

"I don't quite see how you will mend matters by leaving me all alone," objected Violet, and he did not like to point out that the fact of her having been left all alone might be regarded as an extenuating circumstance.

Whether at a pinch he could have contrived to scale those precipitous, treacherous red cliffs or not seemed to him doubtful when he surveyed them at close quarters; but in any case, Violet declined to be abandoned. Perhaps she was a little ashamed of the confession which had been wrung from her and which her companion had so mercifully ignored, for as soon as they had landed, and Hubert had dragged the boat a short distance up the shelving sands, she made a gallant effort to recover her gaiety.

"This comes of getting one's own way," she remarked, with a shrug. "I wanted an inch and I've been given so many ells that I haven't an idea what to do with them. I suppose you didn't bring a pack of cards in your pocket, did you?"

Hubert had not carried prescience so far. "But there are the ruins of the chapel," he suggested, pointing to some sparse fragments of masonry whence the headland derived its name; "we might stroll up and have a look at them."

Antiquarians still take a certain interest in those remains of a place of worship which is said to date from the earliest introduction of Christianity into these Islands; but after many centuries of disintegration and the systematic pilferings of such dwellers in the vicinity as have chanced from time to time to be in need of a good block of granite, they have been reduced to pro-

portions so scanty that they are no longer deemed worthy of mention in local handbooks, and have few visitors except sea-birds, who find them convenient for domestic purposes in the nesting season. To Hubert and Violet an angle of the crumbling western wall afforded shade from the slant rays of a burning sun, and by this they profited, she seating herself on a flat stone and he stretching his long legs out on the coarse herbage at her feet.

"I wonder," Violet said, after several attempts to keep a languishing conversation alive had perished of inanition, "whether I am suspected of having got carried away like this on purpose?"

"Of course not," Hubert answered. "Why should you?"

"Why should I be suspected, do you mean, or why should I have done it? Well, I didn't do it purposely; but one doesn't expect charitable judgments and one certainly doesn't get them. Not that it matters."

"Really I don't think it does," said Hubert, wishing to relieve her of anxiety. "Even if Luscombe didn't see for himself that I was the only person to blame, he won't doubt my word when I tell him so."

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of Bob!" was Violet's unforeseen and slightly impatient rejoinder.

She did not, however, state whose lack of charity she had had in mind, and Hubert forbore to question her. Did she want him to acknowledge that he had judged her harshly with reference to another affair? If that was what she was driving at, he could give her no help; the less said about it the better. He therefore said nothing at all, but pulled up tufts of grass and

scattered them broadcast until, after an interval of a minute or two, she resumed:

"I suppose you know that I am to be married next month."

Hubert started and looked up quickly. "No; I hadn't heard."

"It was only decided upon last night. A London wedding would have meant waiting until the winter, which Bob didn't wish, and I have no particularly strong wish myself, one way or the other. I should think, if one had been condemned to death, one would prefer the sentence to be carried out at once, shouldn't you?"

"Is that how you feel about your marriage?" Hubert could hardly avoid asking.

"You know quite well how I feel about it, and I know quite well what you think about me. All the same, I did right. I don't repent."

"I am glad to hear it," said Hubert stiffly.

"No, you are not glad; you are sorry. You would like me to be miserable and remorseful. You don't realise—or rather you don't choose to admit—that I had no choice."

Hubert was not much inclined to take up the challenge. "I haven't the impertinence to set myself up as a critic of your actions," he answered slowly, after uprooting more grass. "Of course I understand that it was a strong temptation."

"It wasn't a temptation; it was a necessity. A man who is hard up may be strongly tempted to marry an heiress; but he isn't obliged to do it; he can work for his living. There's absolutely only one way in which a

semi-educated woman can escape from eating the bread of charity."

Hubert heaved a long sigh. "Yes, I know; I haven't forgotten what you told me. I daresay it's true that in one sense you had no choice. But—Luscombe!"

"Well, you rather like him, don't you? He is what you call 'not half a bad chap.'"

"It isn't a question of whether I like him or not. But what is the good of talking about it?"

"We must talk about something for the next two hours and a half, and most likely we shall never talk about anything together again, as you mean to turn a deaf ear to all invitations to stay at Stawell."

"I didn't say that."

"You couldn't have said it more distinctly. Why are you so vindictive?"

The young man raised himself into a more erect posture, clasped his hands round his knees and looked his tormentor full in the face. "I don't think I am vindictive," he answered, "but I don't think you can really need to be told why I am not going to return to Stawell as your guest."

Her eyes met his deprecatingly. "Was it my fault?" she murmured.

"I don't know—perhaps not. I suppose I should have loved you anyhow."

"I saw that you cared a little," she owned, "but——"

"I care so much that I hope to God I shall never set eyes on you again after your wedding day!" he interrupted vehemently.

She began to weep noiselessly, as those weep who have no hope. "But I thought," she went on, completing her unfinished sentence, "the best thing I could do for you was to disgust you. I didn't think you cared as much as—as I did."

Although the last three words were inaudible, Hubert knew that they had been uttered, and they had the very natural effect of causing him to forget several things which it behoved him to bear in mind. As for Violet, whose notions of duty remained curiously high, considering the influences which had been brought to bear upon her, she may surely be forgiven for granting herself a few brief minutes of sheer bliss. Blissful they were, though she knew full well that they would have no successors, and though, even while the arms of the man whom she loved encircled her and his kisses were warm upon her lips, she never wavered in the purpose to which she was pledged. Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die! Just now—just during this evanescent flash of experience—she was as happy as Hubert was, if not as crazy, and who can be hard-hearted enough to grudge the poor girl so niggardly a share of life's good gifts?

Such as her happiness was, it did not last long. She herself had to murder it when Hubert compelled her to tell him that he was talking like a madman. The rupture with Bob Luscombe which he so naïvely assumed to be a matter of course; the long years of waiting until he should be in a position to offer her some humble suburban home, combined with the bare means of subsistence; the sweet, but ludicrous delusion that he and she could have a future of any description

in common—all these visions had to be swept out of the domain of actualities, and without many words that imperative duty was accomplished.

He did not make it easy for her. He could not, or would not, believe that she was at once sincere in her love for him and inexorable in her determination to sever her life from his.

"You love me!" he cried, in a sort of angry triumph; "you have told me so, and all the rest follows. It wouldn't be possible for you to marry Luscombe now, even if you were fond of him, instead of hating him and being—as you confess you are—afraid of him."

"It *is* possible," she meekly persisted, "and I am going to do it. Nothing follows from my loving you and telling you so, except that we must not meet any more; everything else remains just as it was."

To her the proposition was self-evident; to him it appeared flatly self-contradictory. How could she help recognising that their mutual avowal had made all the difference in the world! His love and anger and bewilderment drew from him some bitter speeches which she took uncomplainingly. No love, no wrath, no eloquence could do away with the two relentless facts that she must marry and that the man whom she would fain have chosen was debarred by penury from marrying her. Only when at length he threatened to confess all to Bob Luscombe, unless she did, she gently reminded him that that would be going too far.

"You can't give me away," she said, employing the phraseology which came most naturally to them both; "it wouldn't be playing the game."

He made a gesture of despairing acquiescence, but retorted by asking her whether she thought it was playing the game to marry one man while she loved another.

"Well," she answered, "I am a woman, you see; we have rules of our own which are not quite the same as yours." Then, after considering for a space: "I shall make it up to him; I don't mean to be a bad wife. He may keep me down at Stawell the whole year round if he chooses; for, after all, I don't suppose I should be any happier in London."

Although each disputant had said all that there was to say, they protracted a barren contest by means of reiteration until a shout from below caused them to spring guiltily apart.

"Hadlow ahoy! Where the doose have you two hidden yourselves?"

It was Bob, who had arrived to keep them company and who, after waved handkerchiefs had signalled him up from the beach, had only good-humoured rebukes to pronounce.

"Well, you're a nice couple of duffers! Teach you to look where you're going another time—what? I thought I'd better follow you, but I put Miss Penrose ashore, as she was afraid the old man might be wondering what had become of her and getting into a stew. We landed the others at Kingsmoreton first. Now what excuse have you got to make for yourselves, eh?"

Violet, with much presence of mind and with every trace of emotion banished from her face, carried the war into the enemy's country by returning:

"It was all your fault! Why didn't you give us a yell when you saw what was going to happen?"

Bob laughed boisterously. "My fault, was it? I like that! I suppose you'll say it was my fault that I got left behind on the raft next."

"So it was," Violet coolly declared. "As you chose to get out and as Mr. Cyril Hadlow didn't choose to get in, we had to fend for ourselves."

An amicable wrangle ensued, in the course of which Hubert strolled away and, seating himself on a rock by the water's edge, pondered the problem of the eternal feminine with somewhat less detachment than the subject demands. He had ample time to devote to it before the tide began to flow, and perhaps Bob appreciated his tact in absenting himself. Violet certainly did.

CHAPTER XVII.

ADELA IN EXCELSIS.

Mr. Pickering and his curate Mr. Sandford, who had been asked to dine at the Court that evening, arrived a little before their time, which enabled the former to comply the more readily with a request, conveyed to him while he was removing his overcoat, that he would "see her ladyship for a minute upstairs." Periodical problems, relating to domestic or parochial matters, arose with which Lady Constantia did not wish her husband to be troubled, so that there was nothing unusual in such a summons; but as soon as the Rector

was shown into the somewhat bare and severely furnished room which, for want of a more appropriate designation, was called "her ladyship's boudoir," he perceived that his old friend was disturbed to a greater extent than she would have been by any ordinary delinquencies of dependants.

"A rather shocking thing has happened," she told him at once; "Adela has inveigled that senseless young man into making her an offer of marriage."

The Rector pursed up his lips. "Dear me! this is a little sudden, isn't it?"

"I shouldn't wonder if he thought so," Lady Constantia answered, with some bitterness; "Adela probably came to a decision the moment she knew that his position here was secure. There is nothing to be done with Adela; but you have influence with him. Can't you persuade him to break it off?"

"I hardly see on what ground I could do that. One must presume that he is attached to her."

Lady Constantia shook her head. "I see and hear so little that I can't speak from personal observation, but I presumed from what you all told me that he was attached to Mabel Penrose. Adela may have made mischief between them; that wouldn't be unlike her. Anyhow, she has been spreading her net quite openly of late, and about an hour ago she and he came in with the cool announcement that they were engaged."

"What did Sir Martin say?"

"Not much—to them. He confessed to me that he was very sorry about it—and of course surprised."

"I make the same confession," said the Rector, "if there is any use in that. Your sorrow, I gather, exceeds your surprise."

"Adela exhausted her power of surprising me long ago," answered Lady Constantia drily; "but she can bring additional sorrow upon me, and if this shameless marriage takes place, she will."

"Are we justified in describing it as shameless?"

"If you prefer to call it shameful, I have no objection. Not that I object to it on account of Adela's effrontery alone, or because one can't help pitying her silly victim. What I foresee is that if they become man and wife, Martin will certainly want them to live a good many months out of the year in this house; and you know what that would entail. Even as it is, I am obliged to resort to all manner of stratagems to keep him from inviting people to stay, and with a newly married couple under our roof, what chance should I have?"

The Rector pinched his lower lip between his finger and thumb reflectively. "Yes, there's that risk. It would have been reduced to a minimum by Cyril's marrying Mabel Penrose."

"Exactly so."

"But human nature is perverse, and it's a waste of time to lament over what might have been. Now what do you expect me to say to Cyril?"

"You might tell him what Adela is."

"One difficulty is that I don't know. Besides which, he is too good a fellow to listen to backbiting. And, after all, Mrs. Spencer may be in love with him."

"In love with him!" Lady Constantia ejaculated scornfully. "Adela in love!—and with *him!*"

"It doesn't seem to me so impossible. However, Sir Martin could easily find out by forbidding the marriage and threatening to disinherit the bridegroom-elect."

A fugitive gleam of hope lighted up Lady Constantia's eyes, but died away instantly.

"Adela won't be taken in by a sham threat," said she.

"I was only wondering whether the threat might not be made in earnest."

"I fear not. A distinct promise has been given, and Martin does not break his promises."

She spoke with a sort of regretful pride; for although she sometimes thought her husband quixotic, she would not have him other than what he was.

"Well," said the Rector, "I accept a watching brief; I can do no more. I fancy this match as little as you do; but one thing you may depend upon: unless Mrs. Spencer herself can be induced to break it off, nobody else will. Isn't it time for us to go downstairs?"

It speaks well for the self-command and good manners of the persons chiefly concerned that dinner passed off without the least visible discomfort and without any allusion, open or veiled, to the subject which was in all their minds. Lady Constantia, it is true, atoned for the unwonted garrulity just recorded by remaining all but mute from start to finish; but Sir Martin chatted good-humouredly to Cyril, whose account of the afternoon's aquatic adventures seemed to

divert him; the Rector joined in with reminiscences of bygone exploits on the Isis, and Adela amused herself by discussing recent social scandals in an undertone with the curate, appearing to take it for granted that he must be conversant with all their details. Mr. Sandford, who had never so much as heard the names of the culprits implicated therein, was a good deal horrified, half incredulous, perhaps also unconsciously flattered at being treated as one of the initiated. To him Mrs. Spencer Hadlow stood for the world, the flesh and the devil; but he would have conceded that these had an engaging representative in her.

"We must always be on our guard lest fellow-feeling for the sinner should lead us into condoning the sin," Cyril heard him say. In reply to which strikingly novel admonition Adela, without moving a muscle, drawled out: "Ah, that's so subtle! One sees how you would combine sympathy with severity if you were one's confessor. Is it really our duty, do you think, to confess our sins to a priest?"

Not, perhaps, a duty of universal obligation; yet an inestimable privilege which we can only neglect at our soul's peril. Such, Cyril gathered, was the view of Mr. Sandford, who waxed eager and eloquent upon the point. Out of what unpromising material Adela could always extract sport for herself!—and with what easy dexterity she fitted her conversation to her environment! Even Sir Martin and Lady Constantia, it seemed, were unable to hold out against her. Why had she predicted that they would be furious? They had been nothing of the sort; they were not even actively hostile to an arrangement which

might not altogether please them, but to which they had the appearance of being resigned, as to a virtually accomplished fact. Cyril could not but think Adela amazingly clever. Exactly how clever she was he was precluded from appreciating by causes which must be obvious to everybody.

They were, at all events, obvious to Sir Martin, who, as soon as the two ladies had left the room, got up and said:

"Now I want to smoke a cigarette; but I won't spoil the bouquet of your claret by lighting it in here, Pickering, and I'll be back before you are ready for coffee. Come and take a turn on the terrace with me, Cyril, if you have had enough wine."

Out in the warm night, under a starlit sky, the old man took the young one by the arm and began, without any preface: "I must ask you a question which you won't like. Is this your doing or hers?"

"Well, I suppose we are jointly responsible," answered Cyril, laughing a little. "Isn't it usually so in these cases?"

"My dear fellow, we are discussing your particular case, which is unusual in more ways than one. I haven't, to start with, the right of veto which I might claim if you were my son, as well as my heir——"

"Oh, but I think you have," broke in Cyril. "What would you do if you wanted to prevent a son of my age from making a marriage of which you disapproved? Tell him that he must either give way or be cut off with a shilling?"

"Well, I might—in the last resort."

"All the more easily, then, can you bring the same pressure to bear upon me, a mere collateral. You don't like the idea of my marrying your daughter-in-law, do you?"

"No; since you ask me, I don't. Nor does my wife."

"Oh, I knew Lady Constantia wouldn't like it."

"So you see—or don't you see?—why I asked you a rather impertinent question. I must be satisfied that you know what you are doing. Unless you proposed, as many a man has done before now, in a fit of pique because you had been slighted, or had imagined yourself slighted, by some other lady——"

Cyril made a vigorous gesture of denial.

"Unless you did that, it stands to reason, I am afraid, that you are sincere. You have nothing to gain by marrying a widow who is considerably your senior and who has no private fortune. Adela, on the other hand, has obvious inducements to marry you."

"I understand what you mean; but you are mistaken. She is absolutely disinterested; I am certain of that."

Sir Martin was as certain as it is possible to be with regard to any feminine actions or motives that she was not; but he wisely refused himself the luxury of proclaiming his conviction. All he said was: "I may take it, then, that you are not to be dissuaded?"

"What would you think of me if I were? Supposing I wished to be off my bargain—I don't in the least, but supposing I did—how could I go back

from my word now? I hope you will believe, though, that I shall not for one moment think myself ill-used if, under the circumstances, you decide to alter your will."

"I have no intention of doing that," answered Sir Martin, patting him on the shoulder: "I also object to going back from my word. I have told you frankly that this marriage doesn't please me, and I have owned to suspicions which you tell me are mistaken. I can't insist further. Let us go back to the dining-room and say no more about it."

Cyril would have liked to say a little more about it. He would have liked, for instance, to ask what Adela had done to deserve the animosity of a kind-hearted and liberal father-in-law; but perhaps, after all, it was best to leave well alone, and he was conscious of having been very leniently dealt with. He could only hope that his betrothed had fared half as well at the hands of the redoubtable Lady Constantia.

Not until an hour and a half later could he make inquiry as to that. He was called upon presently to take a hand at whist with Lady Constantia for partner, Sir Martin and the Rector making up the rubber, while Adela and the curate talked theology in the background. As usual, he made several glaring blunders, and as usual, after the rubber had been lost, his apologies were received with a silence more crushing than any spoken rebuke. Rather crushing also was Mr. Pickering's pointed abstention from the felicitations which Cyril gave him an opportunity to offer by following him out into the hall, helping him on

with his overcoat and saying: "I suppose you have heard my news?"

"Oh yes, I have heard," the Rector briskly replied. "I always thought Mrs. Spencer was the sort of person who would be likely to marry again. What a lovely night! Now, Sandford, are you ready?"

Cyril ran upstairs, laughing under his breath, but a little mortified nevertheless, and was soon joined in his studio, as he had expected to be, by Adela, who perched herself upon the arm of his chair, drew a long breath, and exclaimed:

"Well, thank goodness, *that's* over and done with!"

"Was her ladyship very terrible?" Cyril asked.

"Terrible was no word for her! She didn't call me an abandoned minx, but of course she gave me to understand that I was that and worse. Well, I bear no malice."

"I don't think you ever do," said Cyril admiringly.

"Can't afford it, dear boy, at my time of life; nothing is so wrinkling. I needn't tell you that I was reminded of my time of life more than once in the course of a trenchant monologue."

"You allowed it to be a monologue, did you?"

Adela shrugged her shoulders. "What could I say for myself? Naturally, it is gall and wormwood to her, poor old creature, to find me for the second time in the position of her successor, and naturally she believes that I have schemed to entrap you with an eye to the succession and nothing else."

"I don't call it natural to believe anything so uncharitable and untrue," said Cyril, with some heat. "Sir

Martin, at any rate, doesn't; for I told him we shouldn't think of complaining if he chose to cut me out of his will."

"You spoke without book there, my dear; I should complain very much indeed. Or rather, I should cancel the engagement forthwith. It wasn't in order to wreck your prospects that I consented to marry you. I won't ask what the old man's reply was, because I know. He didn't fancy me as a daughter-in-law, and he'll fancy me even less, I daresay, as your wife; but he is always a gentleman."

"Yes, but for that very reason one hates to take advantage of his scrupulous good faith."

"Oh, you're another!" laughed Adela. "It's because you're another, and because he knows it, that you may perpetrate all manner of eccentricities with impunity. At the same time, if you feel that you owe him something, you won't be more eccentric than you can help. Let's make good resolutions, shall we? I've begun already, though I don't suppose you have noticed it."

"Noticed what?" Cyril asked.

She dived into his pocket for his cigarette-case, took out a cigarette, which she held up, and then put it back. "Never again!" said she; "you don't like to see women smoking."

"Oh, but indeed——"

"Oh, but indeed you don't! And if I have any other small vices which you wish me to abandon, strike now while the iron is hot and say so."

He was a good deal touched. He answered as lovers answer; he could not doubt that Adela loved

him, and before they parted he was able to assure his conscience that he loved her. He even went so far as to quiet that inward marplot with the perfectly absurd assertion that there are more ways than one of being in love.

His younger brother, who did not pretend to his wisdom or experience, could have told him that there is only one, but might have added that women contrive to reconcile it with conduct which would be impossible to the least refined of men. Hubert, however, had no remarks to make about love or about a perplexing sex when he arrived, towards noon the next day, in order, as he briefly explained, to take leave of his friends at Kingsmoreton Court.

"Oh, nothing," said he, in answer to the surprised Cyril, who asked him point-blank what was up now; "but one can't stay with a man for ever, you know, and I haven't too much time left if I'm to see anything of mother and the girls before I settle down to hard labour. So I'm off to the Isle of Wight to-morrow."

As it had been arranged that he should make his home in London with his family, this was a somewhat lame excuse; but Cyril, divining that the episode of the previous afternoon had brought about a slight misunderstanding with Mabel which might be expected to right itself if left alone, was discreet enough to put no further questions. The communication that he had to make respecting his own destiny was hailed with an outburst of facetious applause.

"Didn't I say so!" cried Hubert; "didn't I see through you all along! Everybody in these parts swore

you were after Miss Penrose; but I thought I knew rather better."

"I daresay you did," observed Cyril drily.

"And I'll tell you what it is, old man; I think you're doing a jolly sensible thing for once in your life. From what I've heard since I came down here about the course you've got to run, I should say you would want a bit of riding to keep you on the right side of the flags, and Mrs. Spencer is just the woman to do that for you."

Mrs. Spencer may have been of the same opinion. She soon joined the brothers, accepted the compliments of the younger with the remark that it would be her endeavour to show herself worthy of them, and professed much regret at the tidings of his abrupt departure. If she could form a shrewd guess at his cause, she kept her surmises to herself. Not even to Cyril—least of all, perhaps, to Cyril—was she disposed to impart them after luncheon was over and Hubert, who had been persuaded to stay for that meal, had left.

"I suppose," Cyril remarked, "there has been a tiff between him and Miss Penrose about something. It seems rather a pity."

To which Adela sententiously replied: "One never knows what is a pity and what isn't; the simplest plan is to take things as they come, and remember that it will be all the same a few years hence. At this very moment, unless I am much mistaken, my beloved mother-in-law is calling Heaven to witness what a pity it is that your brother didn't come into the world before you."

"There," observed Cyril, "I heartily concur."

"I'm sure you do! But why do you imagine that she treated him with such marked favour at luncheon and put on that tenderly regretful air when she bade him good-bye?"

"Because she likes him, I suppose; because he is a pleasant, cheery mortal, with no tiresome fads, and with the tastes that a country gentleman ought to have. In short, because he is a perfect fit, whereas I am a most palpable misfit."

"Oh dear, no! only because he isn't you. If he were put in your place, she would begin to abhor him and appreciate your sterling worth from that very hour. As for misfits, why treat Kingsmoreton as the customer and yourself as the garment? Why not take up the more distinguished attitude of looking at things the other way about?"

Cyril shook his head. "I am afraid that distinction wouldn't make much difference. How can Kingsmoreton be cut and stitched to my measurements?"

"Ah, that's where I come in! You have no idea how useful I am going to be to you. People must be made to realise that a man of your artistic talent is a credit and an ornament to the neighbourhood. They may have to respect and adopt your fads also; I haven't quite decided yet. Anyhow, you are going to be a success; it is I who promise you that."

"You don't even draw the line at miracles!" said Cyril, laughing.

"I draw no lines where you are concerned," the intrepid little woman declared.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A LESSON AND A MISHAP.

When Hubert, who had sculled the outrigger up the river, leaving the gig to the engaged couple, took off his cap to Violet on the landing-stage and marched away in the twilight, she knew full well that she would see his face no more. He could not, of course, remain at Stawell after what had taken place, nor was he likely to desire any more than she did that they should go through the tragic farce of a formal leave-taking. Nevertheless, it would be obviously difficult for him to retreat within twenty-four hours; so, to make assurance doubly sure, she decided on taking Mabel to Exeter with her by train the next morning, alleging that she had shopping to do which admitted of no delay. This expedition occupied the whole day, and whether Violet was glad or sorry to hear that Mr. Hubert Hadlow had not called during her absence Mabel, with an interrogative eye upon her, could not tell. On the morrow Bob rode over alone, bearing a message of apology and regret from his friend, who by that time was already far away.

"Can't say, I'm sure," he answered, with a somewhat chagrined air, when Mabel inquired the reason for so sudden a desertion; "had enough of us, I suppose. Well, as I told him, I don't want to keep any

man in my house against his will, and if he thinks there's more fun to be had in the Isle of Wight than here, that's all right. We shall have him back for the wedding, anyhow, I hope. Oh, and talking of weddings, have you heard what's up at Kingsmoreton Court?"

"Never!" ejaculated Violet, without waiting for a more explicit statement. "Oh, poor fellow! But *how* weak of him!"

Bob looked puzzled. "Eh?—poor fellow? Devilish lucky fellow, I call him! What's the matter with Mrs. Spencer?"

"Nothing that you would ever find out, my dear Bob. Her husband may when the bills begin to drop in; but that won't be yet awhile. What would you do, I wonder, if you were to discover during our honeymoon that I was in debt to the tune of several thousands?"

"Pay up and look pleasant, of course," answered Bob manfully, yet with a hint of suppressed uneasiness in his voice which caused his affianced bride to laugh aloud.

"Be comforted," said she; "I owe nothing, for the excellent reason that nobody will give me any credit. Take warning, though, that I shall come to you without a sixpence in my purse; everything that I possess will have gone in paying for the few poor rags that will represent my trousseau."

Bob's rejoinder was generous and affectionate. He never allowed the presence of a third person to impede his affectionate utterances, nor did he guess that this diversion had been thoughtfully created for the pur-

pose of giving the third person time to recover her countenance.

Mabel, however, required no assistance for the recovery of what she had not lost. She was, it must be owned, a little surprised and a little sorry, for she doubted whether Cyril had chosen wisely; still, she thought Adela fascinating enough to justify any man's choice, and she said so.

"This solves several difficulties, at all events," she composedly remarked, "and it's a stroke of poetical justice. I have always felt that some compensation was Adela's due."

Much less amiable and less dignified were the subsequent comments of Mr. Penrose, who, on being told the news shortly afterwards, became very red and angry.

"Most flagrant case of kidnapping I ever heard of in my life," he shouted. "Why, the woman's almost old enough to have rocked him in his cradle! Hadlow ought to be ashamed of himself for allowing it."

"Do you think Sir Martin was consulted, Uncle Jim?" asked Violet demurely.

"Consulted? Well, seeing that he pays the piper, I suppose he has some right to call the tune, hasn't he? But perhaps he thinks it best to put up with the ills he knows of. There's never any telling where you are with a feather-brained young Radical like that adopted son of his."

Poor Mr. Penrose was not unnaturally incensed against Cyril, whose Radicalism he might have pardoned, but whose inconstancy he could not. To have

been ready (as in truth he had been) to accept that not wholly desirable young man as a son-in-law; to have discerned, as he thought he had, every sign that his formal consent would be requested ere long; to have overlooked certain patent disqualifications; to have rejected in advance all other eligible candidates in the county—and then to be coolly left in the lurch like this! What father of an incomparable and well-dowered daughter would not have been furious? No doubt they were well rid of the fellow; but that did not diminish or extenuate his impudence. Worst of all, there lurked at the back of the old gentleman's mind a terrible fear that his dear Mabel's heart had not escaped untouched.

As he was no adept at concealing his thoughts, Mabel understood very well why he continued to pour scorn and ridicule upon the head of the absent offender. She was also quite aware that she was being silently pitied by her cousin; so that it was fortunate for her that she had a remarkably even temper. Being thus blessed, she managed by degrees to give them both hope that no great mischief had been done after all, and when the subject had been exhaustively discussed, she introduced another to replace it.

"Has father told you about his last purchase?" she asked Bob. "Do you remember that bay horse that Hitchens the dealer was so anxious to sell you last winter?"

Bob nodded. "A nice-looking one, but hardly up to my weight and a bit of a rogue. Hitchens wanted too much money for him."

"He didn't want much from me," said Mr. Penrose,

at once forgetting all about Cyril. "I don't mind telling you between ourselves that I got him for sixty sovereigns."

"H'm!—that tells a tale, don't it? Not quite your horse, Mr. Penrose, I'm afraid."

"Well, I daresay I could have made him my horse twenty years ago," returned the old gentleman, somewhat nettled by the implication. "As it is, I may have to get rid of him, unless he mends his manners; but we shall see. He gave my head lad a toss yesterday, and he seems to be as full of tricks as a monkey."

Bob shook his head. "It's that Lottery blood. I don't care for any of Lottery's stock myself; slugs or devils every one of 'em, and sometimes both."

"Not a bit of it!" protested Mr. Penrose eagerly. "I could name at least three that I'd give a couple of hundred apiece for now if they were in the market, and glad to have them at the price. This one seems to be a queer customer; but it isn't his breeding that's wrong, you may depend upon it. I shouldn't wonder if Hitchens had knocked him about too much."

"Hasn't thrashed him enough, more likely," returned the unconvinced Bob. "I know the brutes!"

A protracted controversy ensued, which fulfilled Mabel's purpose in starting it and enabled her to effect her retreat. She had several letters to write, including one of congratulation to Mrs. Spencer Hadlow which, by reason of the honesty of her soul, gave her some trouble. She cherished no grudge, and assuredly no feeling of jealousy, against Adela; still she could not but think that that astute lady had carried through a well-considered scheme, nor could she help being aware

that she herself would be very generally regarded as a wearer of the willow. However, she said all that it was possible to say without gross insincerity, and just as she had finished her missive Violet came in, yawning, to ask whether they were going to drive across to Stawell or not.

"We are if you like," Mabel answered. "Does Mrs. Luscombe expect us?"

"I believe so. She is in a chronic state of pining for my company, it appears. Rather odd of her, considering that I am going to turn her out of house and home in a few weeks; but, according to Bob, she looks upon eviction as a positive privilege. By the way, Bob is going to ride the bay horse over and keep him for a week's schooling."

"He will have his hands full for the next week, then."

"I most devoutly hope so. Come round to the stable-yard and see him start."

To see Bob Luscombe get on the back of a strange and troublesome horse was always worth while. His methods were not gentle; it was his rule at once to provoke the fight without which no animal of any spirit was likely to give in to his heavy hands, but he was never beaten, and few indeed out of his many falls had been those in which his opponent had not participated. When the two girls reached the stable-yard he was standing beside Mr. Penrose, with his hands, which grasped a stout hunting-crop, behind his back and his legs wide apart, while he scrutinised the bay, a handsome, weedy, breedy animal, rather light in the quarters,

but otherwise well shaped for speed and to all appearance quiet enough.

"Can he jump?" Bob inquired of the groom who was holding him.

"Well, sir, he *can*," answered the man.

"But he won't, eh?"

"Not without 'ounds is runnin', sir. Come to that, there's quite a number o' things as he won't do."

"Ah, he'll have to learn that there's such a word in the language as 'must,'" observed Bob, getting into the saddle without more ado.

His education was taken in hand forthwith; for it appeared that one of the things which he would not do was to leave the yard. On being asked to walk through the open gates, he first sidled away, then whipped round suddenly, laid back his ears and flung up his heels. Bob gave him one more chance to obey orders before hitting him sharply with the crop; after which the battle began. It lasted some five minutes, during which time the horse employed every expedient known to equine ingenuity in the way of plunging, kicking and bucking to rid himself of his rider; but, failing to accomplish that purpose, and receiving heavier punishment than he liked in the process, he stood still at last, with heaving flanks, in mute acknowledgment of surrender. It was now the turn of the man, whose blood was up and who had no mind for partial victories. Having with whip and spur roused some sullen renewal of resistance, he tightened his hold of the reins and forced his mount to turn round and round half-a-dozen times in swift succession, showering blows, first on one side of his head, then on the other, all the time, until

the wretched animal, cowed, bewildered and half stunned, was reduced to abject submission.

"That'll calm you for the present, my boy," observed Bob, with a rather savage grin, as he rode forth under the admiring gaze of a knot of grooms and helpers.

Mr. Penrose had watched the struggle gravely and silently. He made no remark, nor did Mabel; but Violet was trembling from head to foot, her cheeks were dead white, and through the tears which had gathered in them her eyes flashed an appeal of mingled indignation and terror at her uncle, who thrust his hands into his pockets and marched off without a word. Thereupon she turned to her cousin and tried to speak; but Mabel was already stepping into the phaeton which was waiting for them, and she mechanically followed. Only when they were half-way across the park could she control her voice sufficiently to exclaim—

"It was horrible!—sickening! How could you bear to stand and look on at such cruelty?—you, who pretend to be so fond of horses! Uncle Jim was thoroughly ashamed, anyhow, whether you were or not."

Mabel turned a surprised and slightly disdainful face towards the excited girl. "I don't think he was," she answered. "Father doesn't like to see horses treated in that way; nobody does. It could hardly be called cruelty, though, and it was done deliberately, not in a passion."

"That's just it," cried Violet; "that was the odious part of it! If he had been in a rage and had lost his head, I could have understood; but—but——"

"But you evidently don't understand that if animals

—or human beings either, for that matter—are to be punished at all, they must be punished in a manner that they won't forget. Very often once is enough."

"I never saw him look quite like that before," Violet went on shudderingly, without heeding the interpolation. "I always knew he was brutal and brutish; but this, somehow, was a revelation. Mabel, it makes me feel afraid——"

Mabel's elbow was thrust against her ribs, while a backward glance from Mabel's eye reminded her of the presence of the groom who sat behind them. She took the hint and said no more until they came to a steep hill, when the man jumped down. Then she laid a trembling hand upon her cousin's wrist and whispered, "Mabel, I don't think I can!—really I don't think I can!"

She looked so small, so scared, so piteous, that it was impossible to help feeling sorry for her. Nevertheless, Mabel, who knew that her mood was as likely as not to undergo a complete change within an hour, knew also that it was not genuine compassion for the thrashed horse that moved her. Bob Luscombe was what he was; brutal and brutish were adjectives which might be applied to him without any great injustice; yet there was not much danger of his ever beating his wife, while it had to be admitted that as a lover he had shown himself both devoted and patient. All this being so, Mabel could not bring herself to say more, by way of consolation, than—

"Well, it isn't too late."

"Oh, but I am afraid it is!" wailed Violet, with a gesture of despair. "Think of the courage I should

want! Think of Ida and Mrs. Luscombe—and Bob himself!"

"I am thinking of them all," Mabel answered; "they couldn't do anything. Of course it won't be pleasant for you, but when one is between the devil and the deep sea, one must take the plunge, I suppose."

"Yes, and you would look on while I drowned, just as you looked on while that poor beast was half killed!" exclaimed Violet resentfully.

"The horse was not half killed and you will not be drowned," Mabel returned. "If you mean what you say—but I am not sure that you do—you may count upon me as a life-buoy."

The top of the hill having been reached, the groom climbed up to his seat again and Violet relapsed into enforced silence. She did mean what she had said; for the time being, at all events, she felt much as she presumed that the bay horse had done: "I won't—let them do their worst—I won't!" But perhaps, like the bay, she lacked that innate courage of which obstinacy and defiance are no evidence. As the pleasant summer landscape flitted past her, while the light phaeton rolled swiftly along, she had the sensation of being hurried towards an inexorable doom, from which she longed to be saved rather than resolved to save herself. Almost immediately, as it seemed to her, they were within the confines of the Stawell domain, and after passing the lodge, Mabel pointed with her whip and said:

"Here comes Bob. He must have been doing some cross-country work."

Bob at the same moment caught sight of the ladies, waved his hand to them and put his horse

at a fence which divided the park from the grass field across which he was cantering. This was a bank of no great height, with some shrubby growth and a binder running along the top of it and a ditch on the take-off side. As Bob approached he put on the pace, meaning to fly it, which indeed was the only safe thing to do. The bay, however, either because he objected on general principles to "larking" or because he did not fancy the look of the place, refused decisively. A second request met with no better result; but at the third time of asking, which was peremptory and forcible, he hurled himself against the bank, scarcely attempting to rise, and after a vain scramble for foothold, fell backwards, with his rider under him.

Mabel was out of the phaeton and running towards the scene of the mishap in an instant, Violet presently following in her wake, with a thumping heart and a brain on fire. Had Bob been killed? Did she hope that he had? Was it Heaven's decree that she should be set free after this tragic, dramatic fashion?—and would she welcome freedom even at the expense of a fellow-creature's life? The questions presented themselves to her as vividly and were answered as swiftly as in a dream. Within the space of a minute she had time to be by turns shocked, almost exultant, terrified and remorseful.

All these emotions were soon allayed. Bob was not dead, though he lay still in the ditch, nor could he even have been much shaken; for he called out to Mabel in a loud, clear voice, "Catch the brute, will you?"

That was easily done. The horse, shaking, sweating, and bleeding—for he had staked his shoulder—stood a few yards off, and Mabel, after taking hold of his bridle, returned to the prostrate rider.

"Can you get up?" she asked.

"No," answered Bob laconically, "I can't; I've broke my leg. Fell clear, right enough, but that clumsy devil trod on me and kicked me. You'd better let 'em know at the lodge," he added. "We shall want a gate and half-a-dozen men."

As luck would have it, there were a number of farm labourers within hail, and a gate was quickly removed from its hinges, while Mabel's groom was sent off with the phaeton to fetch the doctor. To lift the injured man out of the ditch without giving him unnecessary pain was no easy task for rough and unskilled hands, but under such circumstances Bob showed at his very best. That he was suffering acutely his face betrayed, but never a moan nor a complaint escaped his lips, and he gave his directions as coolly as if he had been a mere looker-on at proceedings which must have tortured him. Indeed, he displayed more anxiety about the horse's plight than his own, and refused to be moved until he had satisfied himself by personal inspection that the damage sustained by that rather ungenerous animal was not of a nature to take anything off his value. Finally, he begged the ladies to go on ahead and prepare his mother for the spectacle of an alarming procession.

"Tell her it's all right—no occasion to get agitated.

Else we shall have her howling herself off into hysterics most likely."

It was impossible not to admire his pluck, and if he had wished to obliterate the effect produced by his previous behaviour upon Violet's impressionable mind, he could have hit upon no better method of so doing. Mrs. Luscombe, on the other hand, proved a little trying. The good lady, though much upset by the news conveyed to her, did not become hysterical; but, with a sublime and ridiculous self-abnegation, she insisted upon Violet's presence in the bedroom whither the sufferer was transported, and resigned to her the privilege of making such preparations as could be made for the advent of the doctor.

"It is your right to be with him, my dear," said she in a strident whisper; "he belongs to you now even more than he does to me."

Happily, the doctor, who had been intercepted a mile away, was soon on the spot; so that the ordeal was not a prolonged one. He at once ordered the ladies out of the room, and it was a good hour before he joined them downstairs with the announcement that he had made his patient as comfortable as circumstances would permit. But he was sorry to say that this was going to be a rather tedious business. There were two fractures, one of which was above the knee, and quite a couple of months would be required to set matters right.

"A couple of months!" echoed Mrs. Luscombe, aghast; "but then the wedding will have to be put off!"

"No doubt about that, I'm afraid," answered the

doctor. "We may get him up in six weeks; but I would rather say eight. As for a wedding, three months hence should be nearer the mark. Well, well! he and Miss Ord are both young. We can only be bachelors or spinsters once, remember, whereas when we're married, it's for life."

Mrs. Luscombe thought that this remark bordered upon impertinence; but to Violet it was the expression of a most consolatory truth. She had never been able to look very far forward, and this unexpected respite seemed to her to open the door to all manner of possibilities. What might not happen in the course of three months! Somebody might die and leave her a fortune; Hubert might be taken into partnership by his wealthy relative, the world might come to an end and the millennium begin. It was no longer a woebegone, panic-stricken maiden, but the gayest and most light-hearted of neighbours who sat beside Mabel on the return journey to Mannington, and it is to be feared that poor Bob, who had squeezed her hand and kissed it at parting, placed a very erroneous interpretation upon the bright smile with which she had made response to that caress.

CHAPTER XIX.

ABDICATION.

Adela, who had arranged to pay visits in various parts of England during the fag end of the summer, told Cyril that she would cry off these engagements if he liked, but, detecting some reluctance in her tone, he begged her not to do that, and indeed he agreed with her that, under existing conditions, it would be just as well for her to absent herself from the home circle for a time. It cannot be said, however, that the conditions improved in any perceptible way after her departure, and for the next few weeks Cyril was subjected to discomforts which he found almost unendurable. Sir Martin was kept a prisoner in his room by symptoms which, although not seriously alarming, could not, in the doctor's opinion, be neglected, and Lady Constantia's terrible weapon of silence was employed without truce or pity. To be friends with her was impossible, to fight her was at least equally so, and discussion she tersely declined when Cyril, in despair, craved permission to state his case.

"You can't state it," she returned, "inasmuch as you are ignorant of it. Besides, nothing that you could find to say would alter my view, which is that you have acted very foolishly, and that Adela has acted disgracefully."

The worst of it was that there was no getting away from her. Luncheon Cyril sometimes contrived to shirk, but breakfast and dinner were unavoidable, nor between those meals could much occupation be provided for a perverse representative of the lord of the manor. Sir Martin had to acknowledge that he was perverse. There were matters connected with the management of the estate which might very well have been entrusted to his care, had he in any degree resembled an ordinary heir; but what can you do with a man who invariably takes the tenants' side, whether they are right or wrong, advocates secular education, denounces the game laws, dreams of the ultimate nationalisation of the land, and makes no bones about saying so? That he will come to his senses in time may be highly probable, but meanwhile he can hardly be assisted to go about preaching revolutionary doctrines on the eve of a general election, and it was a disquieting thought to Sir Martin that his own time was not unlikely to be brief.

"Oh, I know I am not dangerously ill," he answered Cyril, with a touch of unusual fretfulness, one day; "but I am liable to become so at any moment, and—after me the deluge, perhaps! Is it really a matter of conscience with you to be a deluge?"

"I think it is a matter of impossibility, sir," replied Cyril, smiling. "I see all sorts of reforms which seem to me to be desirable, but as for carrying them in the face of public opinion, vested interests, and immemorial custom, not to mention your wishes, which I should feel bound to respect, I might as well try to control the weather or the tides. As I am absolutely powerless

to bite, may I not be allowed the innocent solace of barking?"

Sir Martin drew down the corners of his mouth. "My dear fellow, that is always such bad policy! A dog who barks and doesn't bite annoys his friends without alarming his foes."

Nothing can be more obvious; nor in truth would Cyril have held such language a few months earlier; but just then his nerves were on edge and, for reasons which he did not, or could not, analyse, he was dissatisfied with himself and everybody about him.

"Ah, well!" resumed Sir Martin, after a moment, "I daresay Adela will teach you worldly wisdom."

Adela would doubtless have been pleased (she might not have been surprised, though) if she had known how much she was missed by her future husband. Whether designedly or not, she had abandoned him at the very moment when he stood most in need of her cheerful, philosophical support, and the very fact that his projected marriage was contemplated with such general coldness and disapproval strengthened, rather than weakened, his personal conviction that it would be the saving of him. He was commiserated or thought a fool, he gathered, because people foresaw that he would be managed by his wife; but a managing wife was exactly what he required. His mother alone, though not enthusiastic, had had the wit to perceive that. "I wish Adela were a few years younger," she had written; "still she will have a steadying influence over you which no young girl could have had, and she won't fall foul of your crotchets, which is a comfort."

Of course it was a comfort, and of course he could

have next to nothing in common with a stereotyped English girl, such as Mabel Penrose, for example. Supposing that, by misadventure, she had fallen in love with him, as he had so nearly fallen in love with her, how soon they would both have discovered their mistake? He had scarcely seen her since the announcement of his engagement, upon which she had somewhat formally congratulated him, nor had he received any encouragement to resume his visits to Mannington, once so frequent; but on the afternoon of the abovementioned talk with Sir Martin he came across her at Stawell, whither he went to inquire for the slowly recovering Bob, and, as she was in the act of leaving the house when he rang the bell, they could not well avoid walking away together. He had an instinctive feeling that she would have preferred to avoid doing so, and this annoyed him a little; for although he might sometimes have rubbed her the wrong way with his Radicalism, he really did not see that he had done anything else to deserve the withdrawal of her old friendliness.

"I hope Sir Martin is better," she began, after they had traversed some little distance without breaking silence.

"I am sure," answered Cyril, "Lady Constantia would tell you that he is as well as can be expected. It is understood, you see, that nobody can expect his health to be quite satisfactory so long as he has such a thorn in his side as I am."

Mabel did not take up the challenge; she only remarked: "He is a good patient, I should think."

"Well, he is good: I am not sure that he is quite

as patient as he was. Perhaps that can't be expected either. I try him rather highly at times, as you may imagine. It's true that I myself am rather highly tried."

"Not by him surely!"

"Less by him than by anybody; though even he, I suspect, is beginning to wish that he had never set eyes upon me. There are some apprentices who can't be taught their trade, even when they are willing to learn, and that of course is a trying experience for the master. It may be a little trying for the apprentice also, though."

"Don't you think anybody can learn a trade if he is really willing to be taught?"

"Indeed I don't! Not all the artists in Europe could teach me to paint, though I would give ten years of my life to be able to do it, and not all the squires in England could convert me into their likeness. I shall always hate the job and always make a hash of it; whereas I should be perfectly contented, and might even become moderately famous some day, if I were allowed to follow my own bent in a Chelsea studio."

"If you feel like that," said Mabel, after a short pause, "I hardly understand——"

"Why I don't retire? Well, I have offered to retire, but my offer wasn't accepted. Sir Martin, it seems, has notions upon the subject of primogeniture which he can't bring himself to set aside. It is a pity; because I should jump for joy if he would release me, and Hubert would meet every requirement of the case."

"Really," said Mabel, speaking with more anima-

tion, "I think he would, and I can't think that your being the elder is an insurmountable obstacle. In so many ways the change would be such a blessing and such a relief! I don't mean," she hastened to add, noticing Cyril's dry smile, "that I should wish you to be deprived of your inheritance if you had any wish to keep it; but you don't want to be Sir Martin's heir——"

"I certainly don't."

"And for some reasons, as you yourself acknowledge, he can't wish you to succeed him. Besides"—she hesitated for a moment—"there are other people involved."

"Oh, several," he agreed.

He did not mention Adela, but specified his mother, who would lose nothing by the substitution of one of her sons for the other, and Lady Constantia, who would accept the change with thankfulness, and the tenants and all the neighbouring nobility, gentry and clergy, all of whom would breathe more freely when they heard that a young man of the right sort was to reign some day in Sir Martin's stead.

"I don't know whether there is anybody else," he concluded with a touch of pardonable malice.

Mabel's colour was always apt to come and go upon slight provocation. If she blushed a little now, it was only because she felt a twinge of conscience on Bob's behalf, and she did not intend to change the subject by remarking, with what seemed to Cyril inconsequence:

"Poor Bob isn't as good a patient as Sir Martin. He bears pain splendidly; but he gets more and more

restless every day, except when Violet is with him, and unfortunately it isn't every day that she can be persuaded to pay him a visit."

"Isn't it?" asked Cyril absently. "That sounds prematurely cynical of her."

Mabel sighed. "I daresay it does; but can you blame her? I can't, though I am sorry for him. It was cynical of her to accept him, if you like to call it so; but I believe she honestly thought at the time that there was nothing else for her to do."

"And does she honestly think now that she is going to throw him over?"

"I don't know. Well, I suppose she would if she could. I don't stand up for her; she hasn't behaved well. At the same time, I do feel that there were excuses, and if only one could do anything to help her or make her happy——"

"One would do it without bothering much about Luscombe?" suggested Cyril. "Oh yes, perhaps so. The misfortune is that one so seldom has it in one's power to make one's neighbours happy—even at somebody else's expense."

"You were saying just now that it was in yours," Mabel observed.

Cyril turned his head and looked hard at her. Again she coloured, and again he misinterpreted that token of mutual discomfort.

"I didn't say that, did I?" he returned. "I said a good many people would hail my abdication with joy, and I said I asked nothing better than to abdicate. Whether I am at liberty to do so is another question.

We didn't quite exhaust the list of those who might claim to have a voice in the matter."

"There is Adela," Mabel acknowledged, her face falling a little.

"Obviously there is Adela; and there is also Sir Martin, who has stuck to me through thick and thin. I don't, somehow, feel that I ought to leave Sir Martin in the lurch."

"Yet you call yourself a thorn in his side."

"There is no doubt that I am; only he doesn't seem anxious to get rid of me. Perhaps he looks upon me as a poor thing of his own, or perhaps, strange as it may appear, he really has a liking for me."

"There would be nothing strange in that," Mabel politely declared; "but I am sure that he likes your brother too, and he can't help seeing what everybody sees. The truth most likely is that he shrinks from taking advantage of your generosity."

"That may be the truth," Cyril agreed; "I shouldn't be surprised if it was. At any rate, I will try to find out."

They had now arrived at the gates of the park, where their roads diverged, and he did not offer to accompany her farther. If what she had said made him feel a trifle sore, he fully recognised that it ought not to have any such effect upon him. What right had he to complain of her "seeing what everybody saw," to use her own phrase, and desiring for him the release which he had professed to desire for himself? Absolutely none; nor did he complain of her on that score. Possibly, however, a fastidious admirer of hers

—and, having admired her so much at one time, he had at least the right to be fastidious—might be permitted to regret a certain anomalous absence of delicacy about her hints. You could not even call them hints, so little had she troubled herself to disguise her meaning, and although Mr. Penrose might naturally enough prefer a landed son-in-law to a penniless one, a less mercenary view might surely have commended itself to his daughter, who would have acres enough of her own some day to let her hand follow her heart. The reason of Hubert's hasty retreat stood revealed; revealed also was a side of Mabel Penrose's character which had hitherto escaped her critic's scrutiny. But does any man ever arrive at full comprehension of any woman? What may safely be conjectured respecting nine-tenths of them is that beneath their impulsiveness, their inconsistency, their love of romance, even their religious tendencies, there lurks a saving determination to do the best thing they can for themselves. Cyril jerked up his shoulders, waved the subject aside with that rather ungallant generality and marched into Kingsmoreton to take counsel of the Rector, from whom, if from no one else, sound and straightforward advice was always to be had.

Mr. Pickering, invaded in his study at grips with next Sunday's sermon, was at first for dismissing the applicant with a recommendation to do nothing in a hurry; but when he perceived that Cyril was quite in earnest, he pushed away his writing materials, wheeled his chair round, crossed his legs and gave the matter his best attention.

"To save time," said he, "let us admit what I

don't admit, that you are wearing shoes which will always gall you. Even so, the alternative of going barefoot isn't to be adopted without a good deal of consideration."

Cyril explained that he had bestowed the amplest consideration upon the alternative, which was not beggary, nor anything like it. "I don't know what Adela's means are," he confessed, "but I presume that they won't be diminished by our marriage."

"Diminished, no; but you can hardly expect Sir Martin to increase them if he is to adopt your brother in your place."

"Of course not. Well then, she will be no worse off than she is. In other words, what she has would suffice to keep us both, supposing that were necessary. But it won't be. With any luck, I ought soon to be earning a steady income. Only yesterday I had a letter from Lord Oswestry, who says he could get me several good commissions if I cared to accept them, and I'm simply dying to accept them! Only, as I tell you, I look upon myself as pledged to Sir Martin."

"Who looks upon himself as pledged to you, eh?" observed the Rector, with a slight smile.

"Oh, you think it's that?"

"Well, I don't think requesting him to throw you overboard is the way to make him do it. If I were in your place—but take note, please, that I express no opinion, one way or the other, as to your wisdom—I should not approach him with a request; I should merely announce that my mind was made up and that I was sorry I couldn't change it."

This was enough to convince Cyril that the Rector was of the same opinion as Mabel Penrose, whose views and supposed hopes he had not thought it necessary to mention in stating his own.

"Thank you," said he; "I believe you are right, and I'll do as you suggest."

As soon as he was out of the house the Rector threw back his head and laughed. "Now, my dear madam," said he, apostrophising a lady whom he had in his mind's eye, "I rather think you are cornered. If you don't drop that deluded youth like a hot potato, you are not what I take you for."

Perhaps a man who was engaged upon a sermon ought to have been less prone to harsh judgments; but that the aspect of the case which had struck the Rector should have been the first to present itself to the Squire may lend some support to the former's discernment, if at the expense of his charity. Sir Martin, whom Cyril hastened to acquaint with an irrevocable decision, listened patiently and (a little to his informant's surprise) owned that he was in substantial agreement with the considerations submitted to him.

"It is quite true," said he, "that if I were free to choose between you and your brother, I could not hesitate. I shall not hurt your feelings by admitting that, from the point of view of expediency, he is clearly indicated. It is also true that if you deprive me of any choice in the matter, you give me the freedom which I couldn't honourably have claimed after all that has passed. But can you honourably throw away a prospect which you have offered to share with

another person until you have obtained that person's consent? I don't think you can; so I must ask you to consult Adela before I burn my will and execute a fresh one."

Cyril shook his head. "I am not going to consult Adela, sir," he answered firmly. "As I told you the first day, I believe that she is disinterested, though you don't; but of course I know that she won't approve. No woman who had ambitions for her husband would encourage him to sacrifice a big position. Then there would be discussions and disputes which would alter nothing and are best avoided. I very much prefer to confront her with an accomplished fact."

Sir Martin stroked his chin and had a short, irrepressible laugh, which he converted into a cough. "Upon my word," he began, "I am not sure that, for your own sake——"

But he left that sentence unfinished and started another. "You think that a method which has been employed so successfully with me ought to succeed all round, I suppose. That may be so; facts are convincing things, and it seems to be a fact that you refuse to be my successor at any price. I presume you don't expect me to make a new will this minute, though."

"I wish you would!" said Cyril; "it wouldn't take long."

This time Sir Martin felt at liberty to laugh as openly as he felt inclined. "Sorry I can't oblige you," he answered, "but any will of mine must contain a multitude of provisions which cry aloud for a lawyer's

help. Moreover, I consider it my duty to consult my wife, if you don't think it any part of yours to confer with your intended."

"If that is all," observed Cyril, "you may telegraph to the lawyer at once. It isn't Lady Constantia who will raise difficulties."

She raised none. That same evening she was informed of the change which was in contemplation, and although her comments were restricted and restrained, she did not disguise her opinion that it would be a change for the better. In praise of Cyril's self-abnegation she had no remarks to make; but just as he was seeking the seclusion of the studio upon which he hoped ere long to turn his back for ever, she followed him, touched him on the elbow and said, in her cold, unemotional way:

"I wish to thank you; you have taken a great load off my mind. It sounds rude to say so; but you have put up with so much rudeness from me that it is rather too late in the day to apologise now."

"There is no more need for apologies than for thanks," Cyril assured her. "If you knew what a load has been removed from my mind, you would understand that I deserve neither."

"And if you knew all the circumstances, you might understand my deliberately unfriendly behaviour to you. I am bound to say that I hate your principles, so far as I can make them out; but many men are better than their principles, and I have never hated you as an individual, if you care to hear that."

Cyril was very glad to hear it. He extended his hand and said something about hoping that they would

be better friends for the future; but Lady Constantia ignored words and action alike.

"One thing," she went on, "you must have realised: the experiment of having a third person to live with us has been a total failure. It always would be, and I trust your brother will not be persuaded to attempt it."

"I don't think he will," answered Cyril, who indeed thought it very likely that Hubert would be persuaded to take up his abode at Mannington; "although I fancy you would find him a much more congenial inmate than I have been."

"That is not the question at all. You may think that it would be good for Martin to have young people in the house and to lead a less solitary life; but it would not; it would be the worst thing possible for him. In his state of health, all he needs—all we ask for—is solitude and peace until one of us dies."

Her voice trembled; her tone had become that of a suppliant; her haggard eyes made an appeal which was, after all, not unintelligible. Perhaps she was selfish; yet there was something rather touching in her fierce desire to keep the old man whom she loved and with whom she had shared so many sorrows to herself for the remainder of their joint days.

"I'll caution Hubert," Cyril promised; "I'll tell him how you feel about it."

Lady Constantia thanked him once more, bade him good night and was moving away when she turned her head to add:

"I suppose you foresee that Adela will be displeased. You intend to burn your ships before telling her anything, I hear. That is very wise of you; you will not regret it."

CHAPTER XX.

VIOLET'S WAGES.

To those appointed to die a respite must always appear an inestimable boon at the moment when it is granted; but one may suppose that it does not take them very long to realise how vast is the difference between that and a reprieve. Violet Ord, who, in the first joy of hearing that her wedding day would have to be postponed for three months, almost managed to persuade herself that she was free, grew dull and depressed as the weeks went by without any episode occurring to loosen her fetters and with a great many to keep her in mind of them. Bob lying helpless on his back was less easy to evade than the stalwart lover whom she had displayed such ingenuity in holding at arm's length; in common decency she had to spend at least an hour every day by his bedside, and the intolerable part of this sentry duty was that her entrance to relieve guard was the signal for Mrs. Luscombe's or the nurse's headlong flight. In vain she implored them not to stir. Archly incredulous of her sincerity, they insisted upon leaving her, and no sooner were they out of the room than the invalid became distressingly affectionate. To elude the caresses of a broken-legged man is of course physically practicable; but it is no such simple matter to resist his entreaties, especially when

these are backed by premonitory gusts of a temper which inspires you with panic. And, alas! the more she saw of her future husband, whether he was sullen, cheerful, piteous or adoring, the more insufferable did Violet find him. A time came when she was fain to resort to clumsy strategy. She had a headache, or a cold coming on, or letters to write—any excuse must serve where all were so transparently hollow, and Mabel, who was the bearer of them, warned her of their futility.

"I can't help it," Violet returned despairingly; "if he suspects that that sort of thing is more than I can stand, he suspects the truth. Surely you might give him a mild hint! I'm ready to play cards with him or read the *Sporting Times* aloud or anything else he likes in reason; but I do draw the line at moist embraces!"

But Mabel declined to convey any hints, mild or other. She was not very sympathising; she pointed out, with unanswerable logic, that a thing cannot be and not be at one and the same time; she thought Violet ought to come to a decision, and she said so.

"If you want to break off your engagement, I'll give you all the help I can; but neither I nor anybody else can save you in spite of yourself."

That it would end by her having to work out her own salvation in one sense and her own ruin in another became daily more evident to the hapless Violet, who was forced to recognise that if courage has its limits—easily enough reached by her—so also has cowardice. Bob's rage, Ida's biting insults, the tearful reproaches of Mrs. Luscombe, the amused contempt of her friends

and acquaintances—the thought that she must needs face all these made her blood run cold; yet there was one thing to which it seemed that even fear could not drive her, and there was just one faint ray of light discernible through the lowering tempest which she felt herself irresistibly impelled to brave. Hubert would understand why she had done this apparently crazy deed and would despise her no more. It would not, of course, bring her any nearer to him; nothing short of a miracle could accomplish that; but at least he would see that she loved him and that she had it in her to make far greater sacrifices for the sake of love than he had contemplated in his preposterous vision of suburban bliss. It was in this exalted mental condition that she took her cousin into her confidence all of a sudden one afternoon by announcing:

"Mabel, I am going over to Stawell presently to tell Bob that it's all off. Pray for me! How I shall pull through Heaven alone knows; but I'd rather die than marry him, and—and I'd rather live than die, ghastly as the future looks!"

"Are you in earnest this time?" Mabel asked doubtfully.

"Judge of how much in earnest I am when I tell you that I'd give my ears not to be! But there's no help for it; I fought as long as I could, and now I'm fairly beaten."

"By what, I wonder?"

"Suppose we say by my conscience, if we must give it a name. I am sure you would like to think that I had one."

"I should like very much to think that you had a heart."

"Oh, I've got that too; I can feel it fluttering in my boots. I should tread it out if I attempted to walk; so perhaps you'll order a conveyance of some sort for me."

Mabel did so very willingly. "I'll drive you over myself if you like," she said; but Violet preferred to enter the lists alone, remarking that moral support could avail her nothing in the coming encounter.

"Besides, you wouldn't be able to give it; you would have to own, when you were appealed to, that no language was too abusive to apply to my behaviour."

"I am afraid you must be prepared for some abuse," assented Mabel; "but I don't call it behaving badly to confess the truth, even at the eleventh hour. You'll tell him the whole truth, won't you, Violet? It's the only safe plan."

"I'll tell him that the bare sight of him makes me feel ill, if that's what you mean."

"You know that isn't what I mean. Poor Bob may have illusions, but it is impossible that he can fancy you are in love with him. He doesn't seem to insist upon that, but I daresay he will insist upon holding you to your promise, unless you can convince him that you love somebody else. Oh, don't waste time in trying to convince me that you don't! I haven't said anything about it to you before, because it seemed useless to speak while you chose to keep silence; but of course I could conjecture what took place that afternoon at Chapel Point."

Violet needed no additional encouragement to pour forth the tale of her sorrows, nor did she plead in vain for a renewal of the affection and condolence which had been denied to her of late. As for comfort, Mabel could only offer it in the form of such oracular assertions as that one should never despair, that the longest lane has a turning, that the darkest hour precedes the dawn, and so forth. She herself, it is true, had a more or less definite hope; but she dared not give utterance to it, and naturally her well-meant phrases did not check the flow of Violet's tears, which had to be hastily dried when Mr. Cyril Hadlow was announced.

Cyril did not guess what Miss Ord was crying about, nor in truth did he very much care. He rather wished that she would take herself off; still he did not allow her presence to deter him from stating the reason of his visit.

"I thought," said he, after shaking hands with Mabel, "you would be glad to hear that the suggestion you made the other day has been acted upon, with the happiest results. The lawyer arrived from London the night before last, and yesterday Sir Martin signed a will under which Hubert becomes heir to the Kingsmoreton estates, *vice* your humble servant, superseded."

Mabel could not repress a cry of joy. Welcome as Cyril's announcement would have been to her under any circumstances, it was doubly so coming, as it did, at this most apposite moment. Prompt indeed had been Violet's reward! But she considerately avoided looking at her cousin and began to put all the questions which it was only natural to ask. Had Sir Martin yielded at once? What had Lady Constantia

said about it? Was Cyril certain that he himself did not repent?

Upon the latter point Cyril was smilingly reassuring. Never, he declared, had an overloaded pack-horse cast off his burden with greater glee than he. If he did not cut capers about the room, it was only out of respect for the furniture. Sir Martin and Lady Constantia were doubtless restrained from standing on their heads by considerations of decorum and physical infirmity; but they were just as mentally jubilant as he was, while anything in the shape of extravagant contortions might be expected of a young gymnast like Hubert when the glad news should reach him. The inflection of mild irony which pervaded these and some similar remarks was wasted upon Mabel, who saw no reason why her personal satisfaction should cause any umbrage to the speaker.

"By the way," Cyril said, after a time, "I must ask you to keep all this secret for the present, please. Perhaps Miss Ord, too, will kindly promise not to mention it to anybody."

Miss Ord, who hitherto had not uttered a word, briefly gave the requested pledge. The carriage had been announced while the others were talking, and she now hastened towards the door, followed by an eloquent and joyous glance from Mabel, to which she vouchsafed no response.

Mabel's practical commonsense had got a little the better of her knowledge of her sex when she took it for granted that Violet would regard Hubert's promotion as a Heaven-sent reward for her own good

conduct. She did not realise what Violet instantly perceived, that it must throw doubt and discredit upon a proceeding which purported to be at any rate unworldly. What was likely to be thought of a girl who had lost so little time in breaking faith with one man after hearing of another's vastly improved circumstances? What would Hubert himself think of her? And ten short minutes would have made all the difference! Had Violet only obeyed her first impulse and left the room as Cyril Hadlow entered it, nobody could have ascribed her subsequent conduct to motives of which it would now be impossible for her to prove herself innocent. Such reflections were not of a nature to enliven the drive towards Stawell. Once or twice they even went near to making the ever irresolute Violet abandon her purpose.

From that crowning folly Bob's behaviour, when she was shown into his room with a throbbing head and cold hands, helped to preserve her. Bob, who was now daily lifted out of his bed and deposited on a couch, welcomed his beloved with demonstrations so ardent that, in spite of a somewhat undignified tussle, she could not check them without risk of dragging him to the ground and producing a catastrophe of the first magnitude; so that when at length, breathless and furious, she succeeded in freeing herself, compassion for him was the very last sentiment of which she felt capable.

"You will never do that again!" she panted vindictively. "Never as long as you live! I came here to tell you that our engagement is at an end. For the last week I have been wanting to tell you, but I

was afraid you would get excited and make yourself ill. It is best to speak straight out; one can't break these things gently."

Gently or roughly, she had broken nothing as yet. Bob's round eyes expressed sheer incredulity; his deprecating grin betokened only a qualified penitence. However, he begged pardon, adducing reasons and excuses for his offence which were not qualified in any way and which served to aggravate it. As for persuading him that there was anything worse the matter than one of Violet's not unusual outbreaks of petulance, it was not to be done.

"You've said all that before," was his rejoinder to a statement which would have wounded most lovers to the quick; "it doesn't make any odds. I know well enough that I'm an ugly devil, with a rough tongue in my head; it wouldn't be in nature for you to love me as I love you. For all that, you've promised to be my wife."

She told him in the plainest language why she had done so; yet he scarcely winced.

"Well," he coolly returned, "if that was your reason, it still holds good. I haven't lost any money that I know of since you accepted me."

Mabel had been right, then; there was nothing for it but to blurt out an avowal which even he must acknowledge as conclusive.

"No," said Violet desperately, "but I have come to my senses since then. I thought I could marry you although I love somebody else, and I find I can't, that's all. There!—now I hope you are satisfied."

If she hoped that he would be dissatisfied by this revelation, his swift change of countenance must have proved to her that she had attained her object.

"You love somebody else!" he repeated hoarsely, while a dull red colour suffused his cheeks and two perpendicular lines appeared upon his low forehead. "Why didn't you say so before, pray?"

"I have told you why. I wanted to keep my promise to you if I could, and it happened to be quite impossible for me to marry the man whom I loved."

"It *happened!* It isn't impossible any longer, then?"

"Oh yes, it is. At least, I think so. Anyhow, it wasn't with the slightest idea of ever marrying him that I decided to put an end to our engagement."

Bob's fury burst upon her like a thunderclap. "You lie!" he shouted, bringing his fist down with a bang upon the table beside him; "you wouldn't give up your chance of becoming Mrs. Luscombe unless you saw your way pretty clearly to marrying the other fellow. Who is he?"

"I am not going to tell you," answered Violet sullenly.

"You won't, eh? Then I'll tell you. It's my friend Hubert Hadlow. A damned treacherous sort of friend; but that's a matter between him and me——"

"It wasn't his fault," interrupted Violet, suddenly terrified; "it was all mine! He couldn't help loving me; but he would never have said a word if I hadn't almost forced him to speak, and he went away as soon

as he discovered that I cared for him. You can't call that treachery!"

Bob burst out into a loud, scornful laugh. "Oh, don't alarm yourself; I sha'n't break his bones. He isn't worth that—or, at any rate, you aren't. No; I don't suppose he could help loving you any more than I could. Cursed fools, both of us; but I fancy he'll come out a bit worse off than I shall in the long run, though I grant you that you and he between you have played your game devilish cleverly."

"We haven't played any game. I have never written to him or heard from him since he left."

"Oh, of course not! I suppose you haven't heard either that he has stepped into his brother's shoes as old Sir Martin's heir."

"How do you know that?" exclaimed Violet, off her guard.

"Never mind how I know it; you've let out that you do, and that's quite enough. It would have looked rather better if you had chucked me twenty-four hours ago, wouldn't it? But I presume you didn't care to take any risks."

"I give you my word of honour," Violet gasped—"and if you will ask Mabel, she will bear me out—that I had determined to break off our engagement before I heard anything about Sir Martin's having altered his will. I was upon the point of starting to come here when Mr. Cyril Hadlow brought us the news, which he said was a secret. I can't imagine how it can have reached you."

It had reached him through the channels which too often disseminate domestic intelligence and from which

few secrets can be kept. Perhaps Sir Martin's butler did not know for certain what was contained in the document to which his master's signature was appended in his presence; but, putting two and two together, he formed a shrewd surmise, which he confided to the housekeeper, who imparted it, under all reserves, to Mrs. Luscombe's maid, who informed her mistress, who told Bob. The latter had only been so far interested that he was glad to hear of his friend's good luck; but with Violet's illuminating confession the whole truth—and even a little more than the truth—had been laid bare to him in an instant. Now, it was never Bob's way to do things by halves. Those whom he deemed worthy of trust he trusted without reserve; but nobody could deceive him twice, and to him Violet's word of honour was merely the word of a young woman who had proved herself dishonourable. He did not even deign to notice her disclaimer, but went on:

"Well, I've been jilted; but one thing I can tell you—it's I who wouldn't marry you now if you went down on your knees to beg me. Though you've served me a dirty trick, you two, and—and"—his voice shook for a moment, while tears of pain and rage rose to his eyes—"though you've hurt me like the devil, I've sense enough to see that I'm well rid of you. I wish Hubert Hadlow joy of his bargain; that's all I've got to say about it."

After that, Violet felt that he had not left her much to say about it. She crept away presently, and, having had the good fortune to escape an encounter with Mrs. Luscombe, was soon driving back towards Mannington.

So it was all over! She had regained her liberty, with comparatively little trouble indeed, yet at a price far heavier than she had intended to pay for it, and at the loss of the one hope which had nerved her to rebel. Hubert, who had the best reasons for holding a poor opinion of her, would certainly, on hearing of this rupture, come to the same conclusion as Bob had done. It was not likely that he would renew his vows; nor, even if, as a matter of duty and honour, he should, would she have the face to listen to them? To appeal to Mabel to exonerate her would be too humiliating! Useless also, in all probability, since Mabel's evidence could not be of a kind to banish scepticism. What, then, remained for her, who was not well enough educated to earn her own living, and too proud to eat the bread of charity? Some old horror, presented at her head, like a loaded pistol, by the enraged and relentless Ida, no doubt. Such, she bitterly reflected, are the wages bestowed by an omnipotent Providence upon wretched mortals who have tried, for once, to do right in the scorn of consequences!

CHAPTER XXI.

EVERYBODY'S OPINION.

"Of course," said Mabel, after Violet's rapid exit had left her and her visitor to continue their conversation by themselves, "Adela has been told of this."

"Why of course?" Cyril asked. "No, as a matter of fact, she has not been told yet; but she will be to-morrow or next day, when I shall go up to London to see Hubert." Then, as Mabel made no rejoinder, but raised her eyebrows a shade, he added interrogatively, "You think she won't like it?"

"Well, I must say that I don't think I should quite like it if I were she. I should feel that I ought to have been allowed to put in a word for your sake, if not for my own."

"That is exactly what she will feel, and that is exactly why I begged Sir Martin to say nothing to her until all was settled and done. It would have been almost her duty to dissuade me, so long as the question remained under discussion; but she will see at once that it can't be re-opened, and she understands me too well to have any real regrets on my account."

"Does she?" asked Mabel somewhat dubiously. "Yet you are not so very easy to understand."

"Oh, I'm simply incomprehensible to most of you, no doubt. A man who actually prefers his 'hol-

low tree, his crust of bread and liberty' to the golden fetters of squiredom! Adela has taken my measure, though."

Nothing seemed more probable to his hearer than that Adela had just failed to accomplish that feat. For the rest, she did not altogether enjoy being denounced by implication as dull and sordid; yet, bearing in mind that Cyril, whatever he might be pleased to say, had behaved with rare generosity, she rejoined meekly enough:

"You are a little bit too hard upon us perhaps. Even if we can't quite see our way to supporting existence upon a crust, we don't all of us regard riches as the only important consideration."

A lady who cannot be satisfied with less than the succession to two large estates must attach a good deal of importance to wealth, Cyril thought; but he had no wish to be rude or disobliging to his future sister-in-law.

"Am I to acquit Miss Ord, then?" he inquired, smiling.

"Yes," answered Mabel decisively; "you are to do that, please. She would never have consented to marry Bob Luscombe if she had had anything at all of her own to live upon, and ever since she gave her consent she has been longing to break with him, poor girl!"

"I am afraid," said Cyril, shrugging his shoulders, "I can't get up more than a sort of disrespectful compassion for her. The fact remains, you see, that she hasn't broken with him."

Mabel opened her lips, drew in her breath, paused

for a moment to deliberate, and finally decided that she ought to vindicate her misjudged cousin.

"If I tell you something," she began, "will you promise not to betray me?"

"Certainly I will," he answered.

"After all, it is only fair and right that you should know. Well then, she has gone to Stawell now to break off her engagement. She told me all about it before you came, and her mind was fully made up, and the carriage was ordered for her. So you see——!"

Naturally, Cyril did not see all that this statement was supposed to make clear to him; but he hastened to acknowledge that he had been premature in his condemnation of Miss Ord. "One can only hope," said he, "that she will never repent of this afternoon's work."

"I don't think she ever will, and I don't think you will ever repent of yesterday's."

"You may be sure that I shall not. I repent of nothing and envy nobody. Not even Hubert, lucky as I must call him."

"Oh, *you* don't consider him lucky," returned Mabel, laughing; "but if he considers himself so, that's sufficient, isn't it?"

"Quite sufficient; and, with apologies for contradicting you, I do think him lucky and enviable—in every way."

This was Cyril's method of conveying discreet congratulations. It was met by the same odd absence of embarrassment which had jarred upon him on a previous occasion. Mabel laughed again, shook her head sceptically and remarked:

"Well, at all events, you can't doubt any longer that you had it in your power to make somebody besides your brother supremely happy."

"I am glad," he replied, with some formality, "to have been able to do that at such a small personal sacrifice."

Nevertheless, as he walked away soon afterwards, he had the sense of having sacrificed, or at any rate lost, something which left him poorer. At no time, unless for a brief period over yonder across the sea, amongst the bosky glades of Fontainebleau, had he idealised Mabel Penrose; always he had perceived that common-sense was the dominant quality in a nature which had many fine and attractive ones; always, or almost always, he had been aware that she was not the woman with whom he could genuinely fall in love. Yet she had retained possession of a certain pedestal in his esteem from which she must now be definitely deposed—not without a pang. It had to be assumed that she was really fond of Hubert; but she would probably have dismissed him as out of the question, had he remained a City clerk, and although she had spoken of poor Violet Ord in a way which implied some appreciation of unworldliness, she evidently thought that, under given circumstances, there was nothing so very reprehensible in accepting a detested wooer. In her remarks about Adela, too, she had shown herself equally sensible, equally insensible. Could she allow to no woman, then, a little of that redeeming capacity for divine folly which preserves humanity from blank materialism?

It must be confessed that the association of Mrs. Spencer Hadlow with a capacity for divine folly would

have struck most of that lady's acquaintances as more than a trifle quaint. Amongst the humbler, but not the least shrewd of these was old Jacob Beer, who intercepted Cyril on the outskirts of Kingsmoreton with a request for confirmation of rumours which had come to his ears.

"They was tellin' me that Squire hev' a-scratched yure name out of 's will an' put yure young brother down 'stead of 'ee," said he; "but I can't 'ardly credit that."

"Between you and me, it is a fact, Jacob," answered Cyril, "and the thing has been done by my own request. I don't know how you came to hear of it, though."

"Aw, ma dear, 'tis everybody's secret why that ther' lawyer chap wer' sent vur! Now I wun't zay as I'm 'stonished at 'ee, knawin' 'ee as I du, nor yet I wun't zay but what yu med be right, in a manner o' spakin'——"

"Thank you, Jacob."

"Vur squires be squires, an' hartisses be hartisses."

"Just so; you couldn't have put the case more succinctly."

"An' 'tis vulishness tryin' to make man or baste swaller what they've no stammick vur. But a married man bain't vree vur to pick 's own vittels, and you 'm all one 's married to Mrs. Spencer now. How iver come her to let 'ee du this, then?"

Cyril had to repeat the admission that he had made to a previous questioner, and with much the same result. Jacob shook his head slowly and drew his hand across his chin, which gave forth a sound as of a match being scraped against a wall.

"More 'n my old missus 'd take from me, an' her bain't no tartar neither," was his laconic comment.

"Well," said Cyril, laughing, "I don't think anybody can call my future wife a tartar. She happens to be one of the most reasonable people in the whole world, so I am not afraid of having my ears boxed when I make my confession to her the day after to-morrow."

"Wonderful," exclaimed Jacob, throwing up his hands; "wonderful's the bravery and boldness of 'ee! Wher' be her tu, then?"

On learning that she was in London, he expressed his conviction that she would not be there long. A letter or a telegram would bring her down to Kingsmoreton, and he strongly advocated those means of communicating with her, as preferable to a verbal announcement. That she should submit to be despoiled without making a fight for it would, he declared, be clean against nature.

"Her'll be in a bitter rage for zure, an' by my experience o' women 'tis best to stan' clare a day, or mebbe tu days, after stirrin' of 'em up to strife."

At this point it occurred to Cyril that his intended wife was being discussed with a freedom which it scarcely became him to encourage; so he brought the colloquy to a close. Jacob's conception of Adela as an infuriated virago rather tickled him; he could not imagine her venting her "bitter rage" by indulging in strong language or smashing the crockery, however incensed she might be. At the same time, there was no denying that she would have some *primâ facie* right to complain of the manner in which she had been treated.

Happily no one else possessed any such right. His mother, who, upon the strength of a somewhat enlarged income, had migrated from Royal Avenue to a more cheerful residence in South Kensington, would not suffer in any way, and he hastened to supplement the intelligence, which he conveyed to her in London twenty-four hours later, by a promise to that effect. He said:

"Sir Martin insists upon making a pensioner of me. At first he was for continuing the allowance that he has been giving me, but that I couldn't agree to, and we ended by a compromise, which will still leave me much better off than I have any business to be. So I shall be able to go on helping you just the same."

"My dear boy," protested the startled lady, "you don't allow me time to recover my breath! All this sounds very splendid of you, and—well, I suppose you and Sir Martin know best, and of course it is a grand thing for Hubert; but——"

"I know what you are going to say," interrupted Cyril; "you are going to inquire whether I have consulted Adela. No, I haven't; but if you will consider for a moment, I am sure you will see that it was wiser not to do so."

After considering a moment, as she was bidden, Mrs. Hadlow confessed herself unable to arrive at that conclusion.

"I don't know," she began, "what Adela's income may be——"

"Oh, nor do I," interpolated Cyril, as though that were a matter of altogether secondary importance.

Mrs. Hadlow made a gesture of dismay. "And yet you impoverish yourself without even taking her advice!"

"Yes, because I knew what her advice was bound to be, and I knew I couldn't act upon it. Naturally, she would like me to be rich; only, in reality, there isn't the slightest need for me to be rich. One must have enough to live upon; but that we shall have between us, and I shall be able to start work now, for which I shall be neither too rich nor too poor. Don't you understand—she will, anyhow—that what is really necessary for me is a combination of work and liberty?"

"If you fail to secure all the liberties you want," observed Mrs. Hadlow, laughing forlornly, "it won't be because you shrink from taking one when you feel inclined. At least, that would be my opinion if I were Adela."

It seemed to be everybody's opinion. Even Hubert, despite the pardonable condition of excitement and glee into which he was thrown by what his brother had to impart to him on his return from the City, was sobered by a thought which caused him to exclaim, "But I say, old man, how about Mrs. Spencer?"

"The next person who mentions Adela to me in connection with this matter," returned Cyril, "will encounter either physical violence or verbal insult, according to sex. Hang it all! am I asked to believe that she only agreed to marry me for the sake of my expectations?"

Hubert begged pardon. He had not meant to make any injurious charge against Mrs. Spencer, he said; only, when it came to a question of marriage, ways and means had to be considered.

"As for you, you have such a magnificent contempt for money that one hardly ventures even to thank you

for flinging riches at one's head. All the same, I can't help being grateful beyond words. You see, it isn't only that you have delivered me from the counting-house—between ourselves, I do believe that infernal counting-house would have been the death of me in a year!—it's—it's——"

"The ways and means towards a certain end?" suggested Cyril, smiling.

Magnanimously abstaining from comparisons between Adela's attitude and that of another lady in respect thereto, he simply added: "I don't forbid you to thank me for having incidentally furnished you with them, and I think I may promise that you are awaited with open arms by—shall I call her by her name, or would you rather I didn't?"

The two brothers were in Hubert's bedroom, dressing for dinner. The younger, with a burst of happy laughter, smote the elder between the shoulders.

"You old ruffian! So you saw how the land lay!"

"Such is my piercing discernment," answered Cyril, "that I didn't think you had bolted out of Devonshire full speed without some better reason than you deigned to give us."

"Well, it was out of the question for me to stay another day. Of course I had no right to speak to her at all; but the fact is that I did—couldn't help myself! So then nothing remained but to clear out. And now you really think—eh?"

"I really think," answered Cyril, "that you had better apply to headquarters. Miss Penrose didn't honour me with any direct message for you."

"Oh, she wouldn't do that; one could hardly expect

it, though I know she's with me all right. Very likely she thinks things are a bit rough on Luscombe, and, for the matter of that, so do I—especially after his having smashed himself up. But when all's said and done, she never pretended to love him."

"Who never pretended to love him?" inquired Cyril, open-mouthed.

"Why, Violet of course. You didn't suppose I was talking about Miss Penrose, did you?"

"Heaven forgive me! that's just what I did suppose. Oh, don't trouble to explain; from the moment that you call the girl Violet everything explains itself. Good Lord!—what must she have thought of me."

"Violet?"

"No; Miss Penrose. Not that it particularly signifies what she thought of me; only I'm sorry that I thought what I did of her. She and I had a talk yesterday afternoon, and we managed—I can't imagine how—to remain at cross purposes the whole time. I understand now why she made such a point of Miss Ord's having broken off her engagement before she heard that you were to step into my shoes."

"Is that so?" cried Hubert eagerly. "By Jove, I *am* glad."

No wonder he was glad. A man as much in love as he was will contrive, by hook or by crook, to make any conduct on the part of the beloved one fit in with his ideas of perfection; still it is undeniably more pleasant to be spared such moral sleight of hand, and Hubert's beatitude was so complete that he paid little attention to what his brother had to say in qualifica-

tion of a statement which was not quite literally accurate.

"I don't care two straws about that," he declared; "she meant to chuck Luscombe, whatever happened, and that's enough for me."

"I now remember," observed Cyril, with tardy contrition, "that Miss Penrose told me in confidence what her cousin's intentions were, and that I promised not to betray them."

"Oh, that be blowed! Promises made under a total misapprehension don't count. Besides, I'm sure she must have meant you to let me know. I say, do you think I might run down to Kingsmoreton to-morrow?"

Neither Cyril nor his mother, who was subsequently consulted, thought so much precipitation admissible. They reminded him that although his commercial career might shortly be abandoned, he could not, after all that had been done for him, desert the office at a moment's notice. Moreover, he had as yet received no invitation from Sir Martin, who certainly did not contemplate being invaded by him forthwith.

"As a matter of fact," Cyril added, "I doubt whether you will ever be asked to try your hand at proving that three in a house make company. The poor old people have had their lesson, and one of them, at all events, doesn't hanker after a second. You had better write to Miss Ord, and curb your impatience until her answer comes."

Hubert had to admit, with some reluctance, that this would be the correct course to pursue. "And

then," said he, "I should think they would very likely ask me down to Mannington, shouldn't you?"

"Well, no," answered Cyril, laughing; "to tell you the truth, I shouldn't. I should think that, under all the circumstances, Mr. Penrose might demur. It's true that Luscombe is on his back for the present, so that there would be no risk of actual fisticuffs; still that doesn't seem like a very good reason for flaunting you under the injured man's nose, does it? No; I am afraid you will have to stay where you are and hope that Miss Ord will pay a visit to London before long. I daresay Adela will bring that about for you."

His reliance upon Adela's capability and benevolence would have been comic if it had not been a trifle pathetic. It struck his mother as both; but, like a wise woman, she held her peace, realising that she had no power to control issues, and deeming it best to await what the morrow should bring forth.

Her suspense was not to be so speedily relieved; for when Cyril walked round to Sloane Gardens after breakfast the next morning, he was met by the unexpected intelligence that Mrs. Spencer had just left for Kingsmoreton Court.

"Wasn't that rather sudden?" Cyril asked the butler.

"Very sudden indeed, sir," the man replied; "there wasn't 'ardly time for the maid to pack. I think a letter came this morning, but I reelly couldn't say. I 'ope there's no bad news of Sir Martin, sir?"

Cyril hoped not, and thought it unlikely. Surely he also would have received a letter or a telegram if anything had been amiss. It seemed a good deal more

probable that some officious correspondent had informed Adela of what had hitherto been concealed from her, and for the first time he became sensible of compunctious misgivings. He pictured Adela arriving at Kingsmoreton with legitimate and possibly indignant queries; he saw Sir Martin's courteous embarrassment and Lady Constantia's grim triumph; he felt instinctively that he ought to be on the spot. Was there yet time? He looked at his watch and found that he could just catch the second express for the west. He had intended, in any case, to return on the following day, Sir Martin having requested him to do so; his appearance twenty-four hours in advance of his time would not, therefore, surprise anybody much. That a surprise of an unpleasant nature might be in store for him he only half anticipated; but as even the half of an unpleasant anticipation is a bad thing to sleep upon, he gave himself marching orders without more ado.

CHAPTER XXII.

ADELA TAKES STEPS.

To quit the field after a victory must always be to incur some degree of risk; but Adela Hadlow, though aware of this, had come to the conclusion that it would be, on the whole, more diplomatic, as it would certainly be pleasanter, for her to take a holiday from the company of an implacable mother-in-law. She had her own plans for the future, which she proposed to divulge in due season and which would conduce to the comfort and advantage of everybody concerned; meanwhile, friction was best avoided. She knew, too, that Cyril would miss her at every turn, which was just what she wanted him to do, and if he should commit sundry blunders for the want of her guidance, as he doubtless would, so much the more would her tact be recognised when the time came for her to set them right. It had not for one moment occurred to her, however, that he could be guilty of a blunder so colossal and gratuitous as the abandonment of his inheritance, much less that he would adopt that or any other measure of importance without her sanction. Thus it was that the revelation of his amazing folly fell upon her like a bolt from the blue.

She was lying luxuriously in bed, expectant of no

evil, and occupied with the agreeable details of the coming day's programme, when her tea and her correspondence were brought to her, and the first letter that she chanced to open bore the address of Stawell Abbey in large capitals. Voluminous, queerly punctuated and illegible in places, this missive from Mrs. Luscombe, which appeared to have been breathlessly written, was of a nature to deprive the recipient also of breath. But if its style lacked lucidity, its purport and object were plain enough. Not only had Violet Ord jilted poor Bob, but she had done so for the avowed reason that Hubert Hadlow, with whom she had been carrying on a clandestine intrigue, had now become the heir to the Kingsmoreton property in his brother's stead. By whom this wicked and heartless plot had been hatched Mrs. Luscombe declared herself unable to conjecture, but at any rate she could not believe that Adela was privy to it.

"I feel sure that you have been as cruelly deceived as we have, and that is why I am writing to you. Of course it may seem extraordinary of me, and no doubt most people would tell me that I ought to be only too glad to be quit of such a girl. So I should be if I had only my own feelings to consider, but what, I ask you, can I do with my poor dear boy in such a dreadful state of agitation and distress, and his temperature going up and up! At least it was until he bit the clinical thermometer in half, so now there's no knowing *what* height it may have reached! I need not say that I don't write at his instigation, he says it is all over and in his brave, generous way he vows he doesn't care, but it is easy

to see that his heart is *broken!* I cannot help hoping that it is *not* all over and that the mischief may yet be repaired. After all, she may have been tempted and led away—she is so frivolous, alas!—and it seems impossible that she should *really* prefer such a very commonplace youth as Mr. Hubert Hadlow to Bob! My feeling is that if he could only be extinguished by the destruction of this iniquitous will, which poor Sir Martin must have made under pressure and when he was *not quite himself,* she would perhaps return to her senses. And then I, for one, should be willing to forgive and forget. Could you not help? A great wrong has been done to you also, and the more I think of it the more convinced I am that it has been done without your knowledge. You are too"—(here several words were very carefully erased)—"right-minded to let your future husband be robbed in such a barefaced manner, even if he *is,* as we are assured he is, a consenting party."

Whatever else Adela might or might not be, she was always clear-headed and always cool. She wasted no time in vain ejaculations of dismay, nor did she lose her temper, which proves that she was indeed a woman in a thousand. What she did was to scribble off a telegram to Kingsmoreton, announcing her arrival for that afternoon; after which she rang the bell and gave the necessary orders to her maid. Most certainly she did not intend to let Cyril be robbed, and although he doubtless deserved the calamity which he appeared to have invited, she was as little disposed to acquiesce in discomfiture for him as was her ingenuous correspondent to accept it on behalf of Bob.

"Mabel must have put him up to this," she mused, on the way to Paddington—"Mabel in collusion with that unscrupulous old Constantia, whom it will be my duty to smack. Sorry to be obliged to upset Violet's little apple-cart, but necessity has no law."

She felt so serenely confident of power to make other people turn their backs upon themselves that the long journey did not try her patience. Nor, when she reached her destination, did it depress her at all to learn that Cyril had gone up to London on the previous day. The nature of the business which had taken him thither was easily divined, and a vision of his chapfallen aspect on being informed that he had arrived too late drew a low laugh from her. For the rest, her task was likely to be simplified by his absence. Lady Constantia, she was told, was with Sir Martin, who had been unwell all day. Her ladyship had sent down to say that if Mrs. Spencer wished to see her before dinner, she would be in the boudoir at a quarter to seven.

Mrs. Spencer smilingly replied that there was no hurry. That message was, of course, tantamount to a challenge, and if she was frightened of anybody in the world, it was of her mother-in-law. But indeed, like the rest of us, she did not greatly dread an antagonist for whom she was more than a match, and she flattered herself that on the present occasion she carried a heavier weight of metal than the enemy. She changed her dress, had some tea, glanced through a few illustrated papers and punctually at the appointed hour entered the redoubtable

presence with her accustomed air of slightly sleepy composure.

Lady Constantia, who received her standing, did not even extend a welcoming hand. Her ladyship knew there was going to be a set-to and disdained the preliminary conventionalities of the ring. She said:

"You have seen Cyril, I suppose?"

"Just missed him," answered Adela, sitting down; "but I heard this morning what you and he had been about during my absence, and—here I am."

Lady Constantia nodded. "I may as well tell you at once that your coming here can do neither good nor harm. What is done is done. You have some cause of quarrel with Cyril, no doubt; but that is for you and him to settle between you. For my own part, I don't mind saying that I think he acted wisely in retiring from an impossible position, and still more wisely in concealing his intentions from you until they had been carried into effect."

"Because I should never have allowed him to carry them into effect, do you mean?" asked Adela placidly. "Yes, there would be something in that if wills were irrevocable. Fortunately or unfortunately, they aren't. Unfortunately, from your point of view, I should say, because it will be so awkward for you to have to tell Hubert that you have changed your minds after all. Your own fault, of course; still one sympathises with you."

"I think you forget," returned Lady Constantia, with icy displeasure, "that it is no longer in Cyril's power to cancel an arrangement which was agreed to,

and indeed proposed, by him. Personally, I doubt whether your influence over him is as great as you imagine; but whether it is or not, the will is your father-in-law's, not his."

"Oh, I forget nothing," Adela assured her; "I even remember some things which you would have borne in mind if you hadn't been in such a desperate hurry to steal a march upon me. But really I don't want to give more trouble than I can help. You will have to acknowledge that a mistake has been made, that's all, and if you feel that some amends are due to Hubert, why not console him with a legacy? The estate can stand it."

Lady Constantia frowned. "I don't know what your object may be in taking up this flippant tone," said she curtly; "it seems to me rather silly. You must be perfectly well aware that you will not persuade your father-in-law to alter his will."

"I haven't the slightest intention of trying," Adela replied: "I shall leave it to you to do that."

"To *me!*"

"Certainly. Unless I am very much mistaken, he made it to please you, and he will destroy it to please you, if you insist."

"I must assume that you are in your right mind, Adela, but you talk like a lunatic. Why should I undo what you choose to consider my own work?"

"It is so odd of you not to see! Why, if it comes to that, should I submit to flagrant injustice? You don't, of course, credit me with caring an atom for Cyril; you think I inveigled him into proposing to me simply because I wanted to recover the prospect that I

had lost, and if I laid claim to any other motive you wouldn't believe me."

"To be honest with you, Adela, I should not. It is disagreeable to have to say such things, but I cannot tell a direct falsehood."

"Oh, don't mind me; I'm case-hardened. Well then, as you haven't a doubt about my absolute selfishness, how can you expect me to surrender without a word? Because you know that by saying a word, or rather by threatening to say it, I can always bring you to your knees."

Anger, disgust and incredulity were depicted in swift succession upon Lady Constantia's features; but neither her knees nor her back bent.

"I did not think," said she in a low tone, "that even you would stoop to that!"

Adela shrugged her shoulders. "I dislike stooping as much as you profess to dislike insulting me; but you shouldn't drive me into a corner. I'll come out of it, with my mouth as tightly shut as ever, upon the condition that you get Sir Martin to revoke this very unfair will. Otherwise I shall regretfully inform him of your real reason for imploring him not to put up a memorial window to Reggie in the church."

For a moment Lady Constantia looked downright murderous. She controlled herself, however, and said, with only a slight tremor in her voice: "You must be aware of what that would mean in his present state of health. A much less severe blow would be enough to kill him."

"That may be," returned Adela calmly; "but if it

did kill him, you would have signed his death-warrant, not I. Nothing would distress me more than to hurt the poor old man."

"Except hurting yourself!" exclaimed Lady Constantia bitterly. "You are a wicked woman, Adela, and I am sure you would not hesitate to do this wicked thing if you could serve your own ends by doing it; only, as it happens, you cannot. To hear the truth about that unhappy business would make Martin wish himself dead, if it did not kill him outright; but there is no reason why it should make him alter his will."

"None whatever. I fancy, though, that you would rather make him alter a dozen wills than let him hear the truth. And unless you get him to alter this one, I shall tell him the truth."

"Out of sheer useless malignity, then?"

"If you like to call it so. Anyhow, rest assured that it will be done."

"Never while I have bodily strength to prevent you from approaching him!"

Adela laughed. "That is absurd," she retorted. "You can't keep him a prisoner in his bedroom for ever, and if the will is to stand, time won't be of any particular importance to me. Sooner or later, depend upon it, I shall find my opportunity."

There was a pause, during which the two combatants looked one another straight in the face. It was the elder's eyelids that fell first. Neither in physical nor in moral courage was she deficient, so far as she herself was concerned; but for the husband whom she had so long and so successfully shielded

from perils of well-nigh daily recurrence she was something of a coward. There is no knowing what compromise she might not have proposed, or whether she might not even have been reduced to unconditional surrender, if at this moment the door had not been flung open to admit Cyril, who had arrived from the railway-station in the nick of time. She turned at the sight of him and almost threw herself into his arms.

"Thank God you have come!" she amazed him by ejaculating.

Adela, lying back in her chair, kissed the tips of her fingers to him and looked languidly diverted. She could not have been feeling altogether comfortable; but, as always, she had her countenance well under command.

"I went to Sloane Gardens this morning to see you," Cyril began, addressing himself to her, "and I was told that you had just left for Kingsmoreton in a hurry; so I thought——"

Lady Constantia cut him short with—"Your instinct was sound. You have come in time, I hope, to save us all. I do not suppose that you have any great liking for me—it would be strange if you had—but I believe that you are really attached to Martin, and in any case, you are a gentleman." She paused for an instant and then, pointing at her daughter-in-law, "I am ordered," she resumed, "to make my husband tear up the will that you know of, and that order is backed by a threat which——"

"My dear Lady Constantia," interrupted Cyril in his turn, "there can be no question of orders or

threats in the matter; something must have been said which you have misunderstood. Very likely I may appear to—to some people to have acted foolishly; but you and I know that, on the contrary, I never did a wiser thing in my life than when I begged Sir Martin to let me go free, and of course I should not part with my liberty now even if I could—which is a total impossibility."

Lady Constantia was about to speak; but Adela rose gracefully, laid her hand on Cyril's arm and said, with a smile: "Oh, you can't be allowed to commit suicide. We won't argue now, though; we'll go and dress for dinner instead. I'll tell you all about it later."

Breathes there the man with soul so brave as to let himself be drawn into a feminine wrangle if he can help it? Cyril asked nothing better than to go away and dress, and he was moving towards the door when Lady Constantia stepped in front of him.

"You must be told everything now," she announced firmly. "Perhaps it would have been better in some ways if you had been told before; but that did not seem necessary. You have heard from my husband, no doubt, that our son Reginald was killed in South Africa——"

"Yes; but——"

"Please let me finish; I shall do it as quickly as I can. My husband still believes, and I trust he always will, that our son lost his life as a British officer and a gentleman should. It was not so. He disgraced himself, and I suppose, if he had survived, he would have been cashiered. I have never understood," poor Lady

Constantia went on, forcing each word out with an effort which seemed to give her actual bodily pain, "how such an awful thing can have come to pass; they say anybody may be seized with an overwhelming, unaccountable panic—I don't know. What happened was that he turned and ran, and one of his own men shot him. That is all."

She stopped for a moment, but held up both her hands to implore silence, though Cyril had not been going to speak.

"By the mercy of God," she continued, "Martin was very ill at the time when the news came. We were able to keep the newspapers from him and, as you may suppose, nobody was cruel enough to wish that he should hear the truth. So it has gone on all this long time. The story was hushed up, as far as such stories can be; but there have been plenty of allusions to it, publicly and privately, and I have lived—I still live in constant terror of some catastrophe. And the difficulties have been enormous! You can understand now why I was so averse to your coming to live with us, and why I hope that your brother will not do that. Every additional person in the house must be an additional danger."

Cyril instinctively held out his hand. She took it in hers, which was hot and dry; their eyes met, and the mutual comprehension exchanged in that glance sufficed.

"You are wondering," Lady Constantia went on, "why I make this dreadful confession to you now. It is because I must; it is because my daughter-in-law has

threatened to tell Sir Martin everything unless you are given back your inheritance."

Adela, still smiling, met Cyril's astounded gaze without the least apparent discomposure. "I must go and dress," said she. "Don't let us be late for dinner, though the skies fall."

She swept out of the room in her languid, graceful way, and instantly Lady Constantia darted after her. Cyril heard their voices outside; he heard Adela laugh, and presently there came the sound of a closing door. Then Lady Constantia returned, breathing quickly.

"I was afraid," the poor woman explained. "She might have been going straight to Martin for anything I knew. But she laughed and said there would be time enough for that when her terms had been refused. You won't allow her, will you? Happen what may, you won't allow her to tell him?"

"Allow her!" exclaimed Cyril. "Good heavens! for what do you take me?"

"Yes—I know—but how will you prevent her?"

"I don't think there will be any difficulty; but of this, at all events, you may be sure: prevented she shall be, if I have to keep her under lock and key until she is got out of the house."

Lady Constantia laid her hands upon the young man's shoulders, gazed at him with an indescribable expression, and then all of a sudden kissed him on the forehead. The next moment she was gone.

CHAPTER XXIII.

RELEASE.

Blessed are the conventions which rule the life of civilised man. Galling they are at times and ludicrously inapposite; yet they tend, upon the whole, towards the maintenance of indispensable discipline, they afford time for the subsidence of excited passions, and serve to remind us that no situation in this world was ever bettered by an undignified broil. The three persons who had parted in an atmosphere charged with electricity met again presently under conditions which compelled outward urbanity, and one of them, at all events, if he had no great appetite for dinner, was insensibly soothed by the truce which had to be observed in the presence of watchful servants. Adela, who sat opposite to him, clad in palest pink, and with three rows of pearls around her slim throat, did not perhaps stand in so much need of calming influences as he did, and perhaps it was scarcely to her credit that she needed them so little; still he could not but admire her perfect self-possession, could not help being grateful for the flow of facile and amusing chatter about her recent visits to country houses which she addressed to a somewhat irresponsive audience. As for Lady Constantia, nobody ever expected her to introduce topics of conversation, nor did she depart from

her practice; but she looked just as usual, put in an occasional word, and volunteered the statement that Sir Martin was feeling rather better.

With dessert, however, came a message to the effect that Sir Martin was feeling rather worse. Such, at least, Cyril imagined to be the purport of a murmured communication from the butler which caused Lady Constantia to rise and leave the table. Being thus left face to face with his betrothed and with an unpalatable task, he was about to attack the latter when Adela staved off the bad moment by remarking as coolly as though there had been nothing of more urgent importance to discuss:

"So Violet has transferred her affections."

"Well, it doesn't seem to have been her affections that required transferring," answered Cyril. "You have heard about her and Hubert, then?"

"At full length in a letter from Mrs. Luscombe this morning. In fact, that's why I'm here; she shrieked to me for assistance. Mrs. Luscombe is frantic, and so should I be if I hadn't the temper of an angel. The way that we have been treated, she and I! Come now; isn't it going beyond the beyonds to jilt a man after your trousseau has been ordered and to take up with his best friend, who has just enriched himself by a trick?"

"It isn't so bad as that. There has been no trickery; until I saw him yesterday Hubert hadn't the most distant idea of what was in store for him. And I can answer for it that Miss Ord had made up her mind to break with Luscombe before she heard that Hubert was to replace me. As it happened,

she did hear the news from me just as she was starting from Mannington for Stawell; but it didn't influence her in any way. Miss Penrose told me so after she had gone."

Adela smiled. "If Mabel and you expect that yarn to be believed, you will have to relate it to the marines, I'm afraid. Not that it particularly signifies; for it will soon be a case of 'as you were' all round."

"You can't seriously imagine that, Adela! At least, if you do, you must set me down as the weakest of created beings."

"No; only your strength is apt to be misdirected. Hatching this plot without so much as a hint to me was a pretty strong measure, for instance. Almost too strong, don't you think so?"

"I daresay it was a mistake; but I thought useless discussions were best avoided, and I—well, I trusted you."

"Good gracious! who but you would say such an original thing as that! Do you generally display your trust in people by robbing them when they are looking the other way?"

"Oh, if you only regard it from that point of view, I won't attempt to excuse myself."

"It strikes me that you wouldn't find it an easy matter to excuse yourself from any point of view. To say that you kept me in the dark because you didn't want to have the bother of arguing is all very well as a candid explanation, but it hardly counts as an excuse, does it? Do you feel at all ashamed of yourself, may I ask?"

"I am not sure that I do. What I should like to know is whether you feel at all ashamed of——"

"Ah, we'll come to that by-and-by; one thing at a time, please. I was going to say that if you are conscious of having behaved outrageously to me — and really you can't very well help being conscious of that—you will at least stand aside and abstain from interfering while I put matters straight. I'm not extraordinarily angry with you—not half as angry as I ought to be. I admit that what has happened has been a good deal my fault for going away and leaving you at the mercy of women who wanted something which you, in the simplicity of your soul, were ready enough to give them. They aren't going to have it, though."

"But indeed they are! Setting all other considerations aside, both Sir Martin and I are bound now by the promise which has been made to Hubert. It is simply incomprehensible to me that you should doubt it."

"My dear man, you forget the previous promise that was made to me."

"I certainly don't remember promising you that I should stick to an unwelcome inheritance through thick and thin."

"Don't be disingenuous, Cyril; you can't think how unbecoming it is to you! Much more so than having your nose broken and one of your eyes knocked out. Suppose you had been disfigured in that way by an unlucky accident after we became engaged—wouldn't you have felt that you ought to give me the chance of changing my mind?"

"I give you that chance."

"Thanks so much; but the point is that you should have given it sooner. A man can't help smashing his face in an accident; self-mutilation is another affair. Of course when I accepted you, I accepted all you had to offer. Really I don't quite know what you offer me now. The privilege of supporting you upon an income which doesn't support me?"

He mentioned the amount of the annual allowance which Sir Martin had thrust upon him, adding that his professional earnings were likely to reach a quite substantial figure in the future. "Nevertheless, it remains true that my pecuniary value has had a rather heavy fall since you consented to marry me. I am sorry, and I can only repeat that you are at liberty to cry off the bargain."

Adela, who had been munching bonbons, picked one out of the little silver dish in front of her and tossed it across the table to him.

"Eat that," she said, "and try to be sweetened by it. It is I who have a right to look sour, not you. I wonder what you and Mabel talked about after you had made the remarkable discovery that there was nothing between her and your brother."

"I didn't make that discovery while I was talking to her; I only made it when I saw Hubert yesterday. What has Miss Penrose to do with the question?"

"The question of your evident anxiety to be released, do you mean? Well, it's imaginable that she might have a good deal to do with it. You aren't going to deny that you were in love with her not so long ago, I hope."

"Your suggestions are rather unflattering," observed Cyril; "but never mind. If I were anxious to be released—I don't say I am, but if I were—it certainly wouldn't be because I am in love with Miss Penrose; it would be because of what I heard and saw before dinner."

"Oh, come upstairs and let us have our coffee in the studio," said Adela, pushing her chair back; "there is an aroma of Constantia about this room which appears to have infected you. You are actually beginning to talk in her voice!"

A cheerful fire was blazing in the studio; for the evenings had begun to grow chilly. Adela dropped into a low chair beside it, produced a cigarette-case and said, with a very fair reproduction of Cyril's manner:

"If I were anxious to be released—I don't say I am, but if I were—it wouldn't be because you are so disappointingly matter-of-fact; it would be because I have such a wolfish craving to smoke after dinner."

"I never asked you to give up the habit," Cyril returned, "and I don't think I ever was quite so matter-of-fact as to believe that you would."

"Ah, that gives the measure of your faith in me! You didn't believe what was perfectly true, that I would have made that sacrifice to give you pleasure; but, on the other hand, you were quite ready to believe that I meant dealing that unhappy old man his death-blow."

Cyril drew a breath of relief. "You didn't mean it then?"

"As if I could! Let it be supposed that I am cruel

enough and mean enough; even so I couldn't have afforded it. Don't you know—I'm sure I must have told you—that my beloved father-in-law stands between me and bankruptcy? Is it likely that I should have incurred his hatred for the sake of gratifying my spite? I wanted to frighten Constantia, and I did frighten her; she was on the verge of caving in when you descended upon us in that ill-timed way and spoilt the whole show."

"Well, it's something that you were not serious," Cyril acknowledged; "still I can't understand your having had the heart to pretend that you were."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Needs must when such impetuous people as you drive. I couldn't afford to be over nice in my choice of weapons. There are so many luxuries, you see, that one can't afford."

"Including the luxury—if it is one—of marrying an artist who has only a few hundreds of assured income to bless himself with?"

"Really," answered Adela, laughing, "if you can't understand my hardness of heart, I must confess that yours surprises me a little. Do I give you the idea of being the sort of woman to accept poverty gaily? But as we aren't going to be poor, we won't fight over that."

She still clung with strange tenacity to what she called their joint rights, still intended and expected to regain these by hook or by crook. There were half-a-dozen ways of managing the matter, she declared; all she asked of him was to remain quiescent and grant her a free hand. If it was Hubert who stuck in his

throat, Hubert could be given compensation for disturbance.

"There's any amount of money, I suspect; Sir Martin has never lived up to his income. Reggie's debts were supposed to have made a big hole in the accumulations, but to set against that, a number of Kingsmoreton leases have fallen in lately, and with rational management the place can be made immensely more profitable than it is. Only leave it all to me, and you'll live to thank me for having been your salvation."

In vain Cyril protested that an unalterable decision had been taken; she paid no more heed to what he said than she would have done if he had been an irresponsible infant, and indeed it is not unlikely that she regarded him as tantamount to that. For the rest, she was affectionate, cajoling, invincibly good-humoured. He ended by finding her almost pardonable; for nothing could be more evident than that she had no conscience in the ordinary acceptance of the term.

The butler, who interrupted her by bringing in coffee, had the air of wishing to speak, and, on being asked by Cyril whether anything was the matter, answered:

"I am afraid Sir Martin is very bad, sir. Dr. Lee came about ten minutes ago, and I understand he says it's serious."

Cyril jumped up. "Can I be of any use?" he inquired. "Would Lady Constantia like me to go to her?"

The man thought not. "But perhaps you would see

Dr. Lee presently, sir; I believe he was asking whether you were here."

Adela had turned white. "Good gracious!" she exclaimed, after the butler had left the room, "what if the old man were to die?"

What indeed! Conscience or no conscience, pardonable or otherwise, she stood revealed at that moment, to Cyril's sense, as an unlovely symbol of scared greed. It blazed in her eyes, it betrayed itself in her drawn-back lips and in the accentuated horizontal lines on her brow; so that while he scanned her, he had the impression—an erroneous one possibly, but not the less vivid for that—of beholding the real Adela for the first time.

"That would be a simplifying event, no doubt," he observed drily.

He did not, for his own part, consider it a probable one. Sir Martin's attacks of angina were always and of necessity serious; but he had rallied from them times out of mind, and the chances were that he would rally once more. What, alas! admitted of no resuscitation was Adela's charm—such as it had been.

She quickly composed her countenance; but her attempts to revert to the light and confident tone which she had hitherto affected were not a success. She talked at random; she threw away her cigarette and did not light another; she was obviously on tenterhooks, and Cyril felt sure that she would have made straight for the sick man's room if she had dared. After a time Dr. Lee, a stout, grey-headed man, stepped softly in, closing the door behind him.

"Well?" asked Cyril.

"Oh, it's all over," was the doctor's quiet reply. "There was nothing to be done; his life has been hanging by a thread for the last six months or more, as he himself was well aware. I am glad to tell you that he sank from simple heart failure, without any pain. Lady Constantia is bearing it as bravely as she always bears trouble, and she has had more than her share of troubles, poor woman! She wished me to say that she will see you to-morrow morning, but not to-night."

A long sigh broke from Adela; but she said nothing, and Dr. Lee, after looking at the clock, resumed:

"I can't stay any longer; I have another patient who is in a bad way. Well, I'm glad you are here, and, to be honest, I can't feel very sorry that my kind old friend has done with life. It has been hardly a blessing to him of late years."

Cyril accompanied the doctor downstairs and was absent for a few minutes. When he returned Adela was standing by the fireside, her elbow on the mantelpiece and one foot extended to the blaze, at which she was staring meditatively. She looked up, as he drew near, and remarked:

"This is conclusive."

"Best so," answered Cyril; "I feel just as old Lee does about it. I have lost a good friend; but I couldn't wish to stretch him out longer upon the rack of this tough world."

"I mean," said Adela, ignoring that somewhat trite quotation, "that it's conclusive between you and me. Don't repeat 'Best so,' please. It really isn't best so. I should have made something of you, whereas Mabel,

whom you will inevitably espouse now, won't even try, and wouldn't succeed if she did. Still what can't be can't be, and I have at least the consolation of knowing that I don't inflict any poignant distress upon you by setting you free."

His ingrained inability to tell lies kept him silent for a moment; but presently he put forward a mild remonstrance.

"Don't be so hasty, Adela; there is always plenty of time to dismiss a man who, I assure you, doesn't dream of espousing anybody else—least of all Miss Penrose. This is hardly the moment for us to be thinking about ourselves, is it?"

"I can't imagine any subject of reflection more appropriate to the moment. What has happened has simply put the extinguisher upon our little project. Or would you rather call it *my* little project? Either way, it's extinguished—and I'm sorry."

Possibly her sorrow was not wholly mercenary; possibly she cared as much for Cyril Hadlow as she had it in her to care for anybody. Her eyes and her smile were half wistful, half ironical. But that Sir Martin's death put Cyril out of the question as a husband was, in her view, self-evident.

Cyril, it must be owned, did not try very hard to modify her view. He repeated what he had already said about his prospects and mentioned that, to his certain knowledge, provision had been made for him in Sir Martin's will; but she smiled at the idea of setting up house upon such a pittance, adding, with a wry face:

"And the worst of it is that I very much doubt

whether any additional provision has been made for me."

He was glad when she left him, glad to be released, glad above all that she had exhibited her true character to him in time. It is not quite certain, however, that she had done that. Most women, according to Pope, have no characters at all, and this one was dowered with such contradictory qualities that it would have taken a more skilled student of her sex than Cyril to diagnose her.

Adela did not appear at breakfast the next morning; but shortly after midday, when he was gazing out of the studio window and wondering why Lady Constantia did not send for him, Cyril saw the station brougham crossing the park, with luggage on the roof; immediately after which a note was brought to him.

"*Levo l'incommodo,*" Adela wrote. "There is nothing more for me to do here, and Mrs. Luscombe, to whom I offered myself by an early messenger, replies that I can do a good deal towards comforting the afflicted at Stawell. So there I shall be until after the funeral, which of course I shall duly attend. I am trying to forgive you, which is the more generous on my part because I doubt whether you will ever forgive me for having turned myself inside out in the vain endeavour to serve you. Adieu, Monsieur Gil Blas; I wish you all the happiness in the world, with a little more commonsense."

Cyril was still twisting this characteristic missive between his fingers when Lady Constantia joined him.

"Do not say you are sorry," she began quickly; "after what you heard last night, you cannot be. No-

body can be, not even I. Yet it seems hard that I must thank God for having taken my husband from me. He was all I had left in the world, you see."

"It is cruelly hard," said Cyril.

"I suppose I must have deserved it, though, or it would not have happened to me. Martin never deserved ill of anybody; perhaps that is why he was spared the worst of all our misfortunes. He used to think that he had been too severe with Reggie; but he was not. It was I who was severe with all my children; if I had been more indulgent they might have cared for me more than they did—who knows? I did my duty as I saw it, and I should act in just the same way again, I daresay."

She spoke quite calmly, though with the infinite sadness of one who at the end of all perceives that all has been inevitable. That was not her professed creed; but it was too nearly akin to Cyril's for him to answer her. He took the only means open to him of evincing sympathy by recalling instances of Sir Martin's constant kindness and patience, and Lady Constantia's stern visage relaxed while she listened.

"Martin was fond of you," she said; "he was a very good judge of men and women. Although he never said so, I fancy he knew as well as I did that he was doing you a great service in one way by altering his will."

"In every way," Cyril declared.

"Well, that is as may be; but at all events in the one. Adela has left you already, I hear. For always?"

He made a sign of assent.

"I knew she would. You may remember my saying

to you that you would never regret having kept her in ignorance of what you had resolved to do."

"I don't regret her having put an end to our engagement," Cyril confessed; "but it is only fair to her to say that she is not quite so bad as you think her. That atrocious threat of hers was not uttered in earnest."

Lady Constantia shook her head, but made no rejoinder. "What will you do with your life now?" she asked, after a minute.

"What I used to dream of doing with it in the days when I could only dream of such things," he replied. "I shall go abroad for a year or two, I think, and try to make the most of my one talent. It isn't much of a talent—a mere affair of manual dexterity at best—but it may be developed into something respectable, and, thanks to Sir Martin's generosity, I can refuse all hack work now."

"Martin always wished to be generous to you," Lady Constantia said, with a hint of apology in her voice; "it went against the grain with him to disinherit you, even though you wished to be disinherited. But, with your notions, you never could have been happy or successful here."

"Never in the world! I was a square peg from the first, and a square peg I should have remained up to the end of the chapter. No; I am lucky beyond my dreams, and far beyond my deserts, in being free to do what I like and what I can with my life."

He refrained from asking the lonely woman what she proposed to do with hers. He had a vision of some possible evening sunshine for her as the quasi-

grandmother of Hubert's children; but to offer her the prospect of consolation in that shape would have required rather more courage than he could muster, and she left the room without further allusion to the future.

Cyril, when he was once more alone, reviewed the events of the previous eighteen months and repeated to himself that he was indeed lucky beyond his deserts. During that time how much he had gained, and how much he had escaped? A large fortune for Hubert and a modest, yet sufficient, one for himself on the one side; on the other an almost impossible emprise, complicated by marriage with a woman to whose somewhat alarming deficiencies he could not be blind, disposed though he was, now that he had escaped her, to take a charitable view of them. As an escape also he must count it that he had so satisfactorily quenched that nascent passion of his for Mabel Penrose. With her, to be sure, there could have been no question of marriage, for the very good reason that she would not have married him. Nevertheless, she might have caused him considerable suffering, had events taken a different turn; so that, upon the whole, there was nothing to deplore in a misapprehension which had done nobody any harm. It was true that—like poor Lady Constantia, if in a much less degree—he was rather lonely; but an artist, after all, must needs be a good deal alone if he is to produce any work worth producing. And how infinitely better it is to be the loneliest of artists than the most richly endowed of square pegs!

CHAPTER XXIV.

FOREGONE CONCLUSIONS.

One afternoon in midwinter Mr. and Mrs. Hubert Hadlow were together in the library at Kingsmoreton Court, the former having just received a signal from the latter to follow her thither out of the hall, where a large and somewhat noisy house-party was assembled.

"Well," said he, taking up his station on the hearthrug, with his back to the fire, "what orders now?"

"It's only about Cyril," Violet replied. "He will be here in about half an hour, and before you see him you had better be told what to say to him—or rather what not to say. Do you know why he is coming?"

"I humbly hoped that he might wish to embrace his fond family again after an absence of nearly two years. That's why mother and the girls were asked, isn't it?"

"Oh, of course. But his real reason—at least, I hope and think so—is that he wishes to embrace Mabel."

Hubert whistled. "Then all I can say is he has been a deuce of a long time finding out what his wishes are. So that's the reason why you and he have been corresponding so copiously of late!"

"Such a thing has never been referred to once

by either of us. His letters have been almost entirely concerned with his godson and with dry-point etching."

"Much you know about dry-point etching!"

"And very likely he would have been to write me pages and pages upon that subject if he hadn't wanted to draw information out of me upon a different one, about which I do happen to know something!"

"But I thought you said it hadn't been referred to."

"As if there was the least difficulty in writing about things without referring to them!"

"Have you been leading him on, then?"

"With the utmost delicacy and discretion."

"Because, you know, Vi, it strikes me that you've discovered a mare's nest. I don't believe old Cyril is much of a marrying man; but even if he does want to marry Miss Penrose, it don't follow that she wants to marry him."

"Oh, there never was the slightest doubt about *that,*" Violet calmly returned; "I knew ages ago that she loved him all to bits! The difficulty is that they're both proud, and they both think they can get along quite well without one another. That's why I'm telling you this. You will have to imitate me by being delicate and discreet."

"I'll be anything you tell me to be. All the same, I don't quite see what's to hinder two people who are in love with one another from saying so."

"It's the easiest thing in the world to hinder them. What put them off in the first instance was that they were pushed into one another's arms. That made them

both jib. Then Adela opened her jaws, and in he tumbled, poor dear! Afterwards I daresay he thought that a man who had just been thrown over couldn't very well propose to somebody else."

"And what did Miss Mabel think?"

"Oh, naturally she thought he didn't care a row of pins for her. That's unimportant, though; I'm not so much afraid of her shying as I am that he may. Once let him suspect that we are rattling our sticks in our hats behind him and he'll shy all round Europe again."

"I can't believe he is such an ass as that," said Hubert, laughing.

"Well, he is. He doesn't forget that Mabel is an heiress, you see. We are quite different, you and I; we had sense enough to understand that from the moment that we loved one another there was no more to be said."

"H'm! I seem to remember that one of us had a lot more to say, and that the other had an uncommon bad time of it before he could bring her to reason."

"My only consolation," returned Violet, "is that I did give you a bad time. You, at all events, had to believe that I should have dismissed Bob Luscombe whether you had been rich or poor; though I'm sure nobody else ever has. By the way, have you heard anything of Bob lately?"

"He is still hunting in the Midlands, I believe."

"Nobody is hunting anywhere at the present moment. He is in London, like the rest of the frozen-out people. Ida met him the other day, and she says

he means to come back to Stawell at last next summer."

"Will you mind?"

"Not unless he does, and of course he won't. One can't keep that sort of thing up for a year and a half."

"What sort of thing? Being in love? Well, your remarks have the merit of candour, at all events, my dear."

At this point the colloquy ceased to be of interest to anybody except the two persons concerned. It was interrupted by the entrance of a short procession which habitually invaded the library at that hour. First marched a majestic nurse, carrying in her arms the recently born heir; behind her walked the proud grandmother, making those idiotic noises which are supposed to captivate the fancy of callow humanity; while the rear was brought up by Lady Constantia, a gaunt, sable-clad figure. Lady Constantia, who was domiciled in the dower-house, a couple of miles away, was not a very frequent visitor at her former home. With Hubert she was upon terms of amity; but she pretended to no great affection for her kinswoman, who lived in abject fear of her, and she had stated in so many words that she could detect nothing admirable or distinctive about the latest addition to the family circle. It was noticeable, however, that she was apt to drop in at the time of day when he was on view. She now sat down stiffly, and watched with sardonic curiosity the frolicsome behaviour of Mrs. Hadlow, who, taking her grandson from the nurse's arms, began to skip about the room, tossing him high

in the air, while she apostrophised him with endearing epithets.

"Go on doing that and you'll make it sick presently," Lady Constantia gruffly warned her.

Although this disquieting prediction was not fulfilled, Cyril the younger gave it to be understood that the treatment applied to him was not to his taste; after which, being, like most of his species, afflicted with a hasty and umbrageous temper, he proceeded to bellow himself purple in the face. The united blandishments of his mother, his grandmother and the nurse failing to pacify him, Lady Constantia called out imperatively:

"Here! give it to me!"

Strange to say, she was obeyed, and stranger still, prompt peace was the result. What the future owner of Kingsmoreton discerned in a pair of angular black knees and a visage of uncompromising severity that appealed to his sense of humour must remain unexplained; but as a fact, he became transformed there and then from a diminutive fiend into a giggling, chuckling imp. He clapped his small, fat hands, rolled his eyes in a sort of drunken ecstasy, and was pleased to accept the gold watch proffered to him, which he at once put into his mouth.

"I abhor the human young," Lady Constantia announced, quietly enjoying her triumph; "but they are easily enough managed if you go to work the right way with them. I have had babies of my own——"

"So have I," Mrs. Hadlow was beginning, when a stare of icy surprise silenced her.

"But I never," Lady Constantia went on, "permitted

them to be a public nuisance. Firmness and kindness, depend upon it, are all they need."

"If that was my watch," Hubert remarked, "I should firmly and kindly put it back in my pocket before the works were ruined."

"You would do no such thing," Lady Constantia retorted; "you would leave it where it is a great deal longer than I shall. As soon as it has served its purpose I shall take it away, and you will see that there will be no trouble about the matter."

The entrance of Cyril the elder, accompanied by his two sisters, may have preserved his namesake from bringing discredit upon that assertion. At all events, attention was withdrawn from the latter and transferred to the new-comer, who met with a reception which should have been pleasant to him.

He found it, in truth, even more pleasant than he had anticipated to be thus surrounded by friendly, happy faces. Many a time during his prolonged absence and desultory journeyings had he longed to be back with his own people once more, and if he had resisted that longing, it was not only because—as he had alleged—he had work to do and lessons to learn for which England afforded no scope. A man thrown back upon himself for companionship may learn much, unconnected with art, of which he would have remained ignorant under other conditions, and perhaps this had been Cyril's lot. Sometimes he thought it had, although there were other times when he doubted whether he would ever get at the real truth of things, subjectively or objectively. Of one thing, however, he had just been made aware which was presumably true,

and which he felt pretty sure would also be new to the assembled party.

"I suppose you haven't any of you seen to-day's London papers, have you?" he asked, after a time. "Well, I've brought you one to astonish you."

He handed the *Morning Post* to Hubert, who, after looking at the paragraph indicated to him and ejaculating "My word!" read aloud:

"'A marriage has been arranged, and will take place immediately, between Mr. Luscombe of Stawell Abbey, Devon, and Adela, widow of Mr. Spencer Hadlow, late M.P. for the Kingsmoreton division of that county.'"

There was a hubbub of confused exclamations, amidst which Lady Constantia was heard to declare that she, for one, was not in the least astonished. "I guessed what she was after; I only wonder that she did not gain her object sooner. Poor Bob!"

"Oh, well," said Cyril leniently, "I don't know that he is so very much to be pitied. He will have a very charming, capable and intelligent wife. Perhaps, after all, that is just what he needs."

"Perhaps it is," agreed Lady Constantia. "I have never disputed Adela's charm and capability, and I am sure she is much too intelligent to quarrel with her husband. Poor Bob!"

Violet confided to her brother-in-law afterwards that his tidings had removed a certain apprehension from her mind. "One hoped," she said, "that bygones would be allowed to be bygones; but after his having shut his place up and stayed away all this time, the prospect of a first meeting was not altogether pleasant. Now I shall be all right. If anybody feels awkward,

it will be Mr. Robert Luscombe and his mature bride. Not that anything would be likely to make *her* feel awkward."

"Nothing, I am sure, would ever make her look so," answered Cyril. "You will find her a pleasant neighbour, and you will see a good deal of her, I daresay."

"One is bound to see a good deal of one's neighbours in an old-fashioned district like this," remarked Violet. "Which reminds me that I am going to take you over to Mannington to-morrow afternoon."

Cyril replied that he would be delighted. Correspondence had brought him and Violet into closer relations than they had ever reached, or cared to reach, through verbal intercourse, and no doubt it was because they understood one another that they did not pursue the topic further. To the same cause, perhaps, may be assigned Violet's plea to be let off her engagement when the following afternoon came; although the reason she gave was that it would be cruel to take the horses out in such a cold wind.

"Really I think it would," Cyril assented. "We'll postpone our visit, then."

"Oh, but that will be so dull for you," Violet objected, "with all the other men off shooting and nothing to do in the house. I thought very likely you wouldn't mind walking over and making my excuses to Mabel, who will be expecting us."

He answered, without change of countenance, that he would enjoy the walk, and presently she had the satisfaction of seeing him stride across the hard-frozen slopes of the park.

"Now," said she to herself, "if only Uncle Jim is up at the kennels or somewhere out of the way, and if Mabel isn't in one of her arm's-length humours, the thing ought to come off. It's now or never for them, anyhow."

The first indispensable condition was fulfilled; for when Cyril arrived at his destination he was informed that Miss Penrose was at home, but that Mr. Penrose had gone out. A minute later he was shaking hands with Mabel, who smilingly said all that a friend and former neighbour might be expected to say after so long an interval of separation. It struck him that she had become a trifle thinner, and it struck her that he had a somewhat nervous and anxious look; but they did not exchange remarks upon one another's appearance. Their conversation, indeed, was of a nature to interest nobody—assuredly not themselves—until he asked her if she had seen the announcement of Bob Luscombe's projected marriage.

"I saw it this morning," she answered. "What an extraordinary thing to have happened!"

"Not at all, according to Lady Constantia; she only wonders that it didn't happen before."

"Ah, she means that it isn't extraordinary of Adela, and perhaps it isn't. But I can't understand him!"

"I can. Didn't I myself—Heaven forgive me!—do the very thing that he has done? Perhaps you couldn't understand that either, though."

"Oh, I don't think you were ever very difficult to understand."

Cyril made a despondent gesture. "How well I remember your telling me once that I was! And considering what a puzzle my past conduct is to myself, I did hope that it might have appeared baffling to others. Well, at least you can't know what it was that brought me within measurable distance of becoming Adela's husband. Would it bore you to hear?"

"Of course not," answered Mabel; "but—does that matter now?"

"To me it does. I must begin by confessing that I didn't realise the truth at the time. For an earnest seeker after truth, as I flatter myself that I am, I don't seem to be gifted with much natural instinct in the way of hitting off the right scent; but that's more my misfortune than my fault. When I asked Mrs. Spencer to marry me, I was under the impression—well, I suppose you will laugh when I tell you that the last time we met I was quite under the impression that Hubert had lost his heart to you, not to Violet."

She did laugh a little at that (although, as he might have guessed, it was no news to her); but it was with a graver and less pleased face that she listened to his further confession of the construction which he had placed upon her words on the occasion referred to.

"I don't wonder that your pursuit of truth leads you rather far from the line if you start with such very odd convictions about people who have done nothing to deserve them," she drily remarked.

"Oh, trample me underfoot; it is your right," he returned, with disarming humility. "First and last, I

have had all manner of convictions about you; but the last comes back to the first. Perhaps I ought rather to call it a conviction about myself than about you, though."

It is needless to report in full the somewhat lengthy narration upon which he now embarked. He was not, perhaps, very judicious in describing with such scrupulous accuracy the vicissitudes of a passion which was none the less a passion—so he averred—by reason of his past reluctance to recognise it as anything of the kind; but he had a feeling that she ought to hear all or nothing. So he told her about his alternate hot and cold fits; he told her how at Fontainebleau he had been ripe for an avowal, how he had been chilled by his misreading of the situation on his return to England, how during his late wanderings he had endeavoured, with ever diminishing success, to persuade himself that his malady was curable and how he had been forced to conclude that the most he could hope for was its slow extinction through long lapse of time. She heard him out with much patience, and, although her colour came and went every now and then, she appeared, upon the whole, to be more diverted than flattered or angered or surprised. When he had made an end of speaking, she said:

"Even now I am not quite sure whether I have received an offer of marriage or not. Do you wish me to take what you have been telling me in that way?"

"Please!"

"Then I must remind you of what you yourself so

plainly see, that although we might be paired, we never could be matched. We should be pulling away from one another all the time."

"Not necessarily. One of us has grown a good deal more tractable than he was."

She went on, without heeding this interpolation: "You are a town mouse, I am a country mouse; you are an ultra-Radical, I am a Conservative to the marrow of my bones; your fetish is art, mine is sport."

"You might add that you are rich, while I am poor. To me that is the hardest thing of all to swallow; but neither that nor any of the other drawbacks that you have mentioned would be worth a moment's consideration if we really loved one another."

"I quite agree with you; I don't think they would. As for your being what you choose to call poor, it would be an insult to you and a back-handed one to myself to say anything about that. I only state these objections because I remember that you always laid a good deal of stress upon such things. It is natural that you should, looking at marriage as you do. But there is another objection—an absolutely fatal one to me, who have different ideas of what marriage is, or ought to be——"

"Of course if you don't and can't care for me, that must be fatal."

"Yes; but that was not what I was going to say. I wonder whether you recollect my telling you once, long ago, that you did not know what love was. Well, you have made it more clear to me than ever now

that you don't. As if any man who was really in love would try for the best part of three years to believe that he wasn't!"

"He would if he believed that there was little or no chance of his love being returned."

"Would he? I should have thought that he would at least give the other person some chance of returning it."

Cyril, who had been walking to and fro, came to a halt in front of her. "Mabel," said he, "I love you as dearly, as deeply, as devotedly as any man has ever loved any woman. And what is more," he suddenly added, "you know it!"

She drew back a little and for the first time exhibited those symptoms of uneasiness which are apt to presage a capitulation.

"You don't," she protested; "indeed you don't! You only think you do. Men who are in love take the women they love by storm. You haven't it in you to do that."

Cyril proved to her that she misjudged him.

THE END.

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